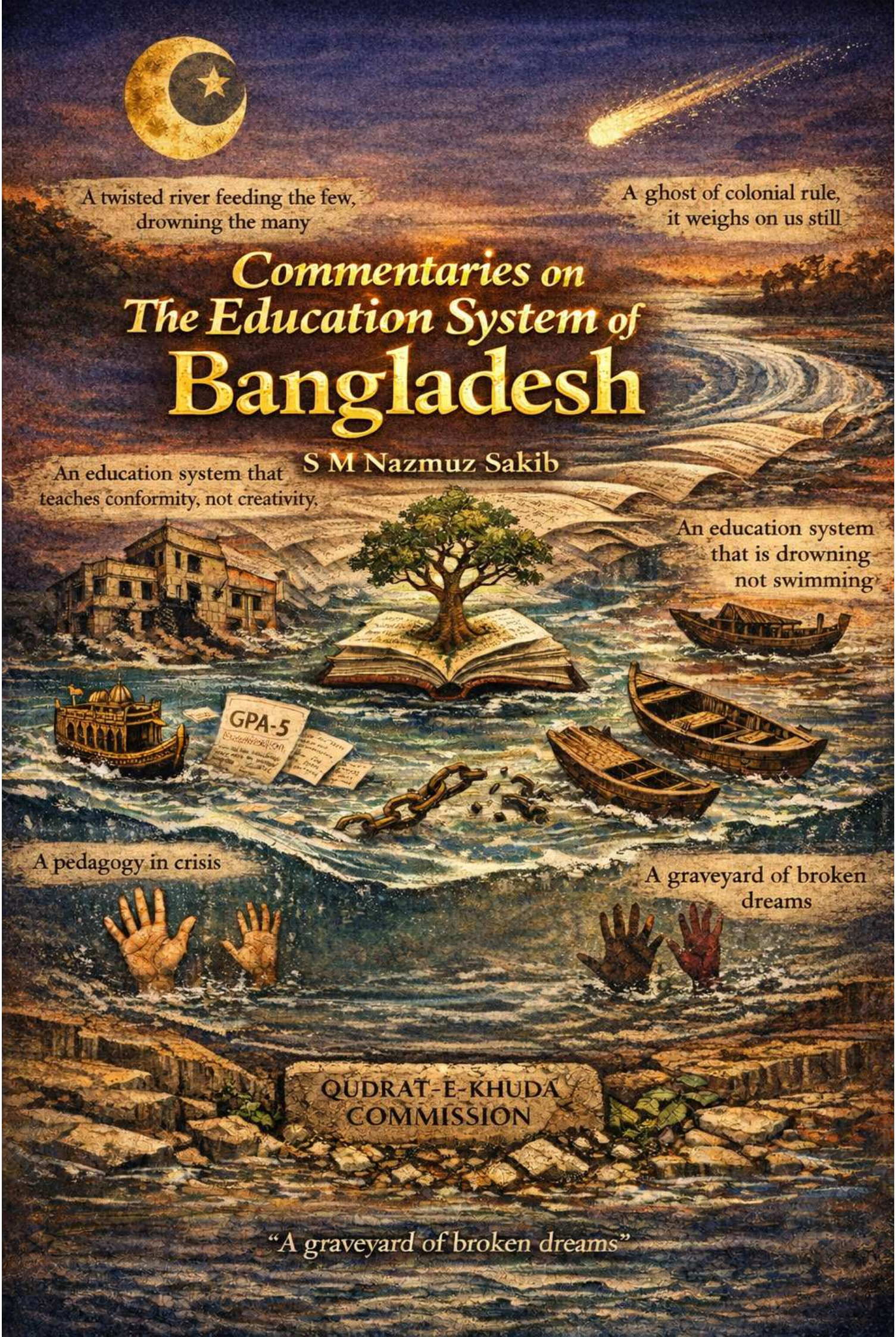
A twisted river feeding the few,
drowning the many
A ghost of colonial rule,
it weighs on us still
Commentaries on
The Education System of
Bangladesh
S M Nazmuz Sakib
An education system that
teaches conformity, not creativity,
An education system
that is drowning
not swimming
GPA-5
A pedagogy in crisis
A graveyard of broken
dreams
QUDRAT-E-KHUDA
COMMISSION
"A graveyard of broken dreams"

Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh

S M Nazmuz Sakib

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Author: S M Nazmuz Sakib

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This commentary engages with living educational institutions, policies, and contemporary political developments in Bangladesh. The author has made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information presented, including the most recent data from the FY 2025-26 budget, the BNP government's twelve-point education reform agenda, and the July-August 2024 political transition. Any errors of fact or interpretation are solely the responsibility of the author, who welcomes corrections and engagement from the scholarly community.

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Contents

Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh 1

Copyright Page 2

PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF AN EDUCATIONAL CIVILIZATION 23

Prologue to Part One: Why Bangladesh Matters 23

Chapter One: The Philosophy of Education and the Question of Bangladesh 24

1.1 What Philosophy Has to Do With It 24

1.2 The Perennialist Tradition and Its Shadows 24

1.3 The Progressivist Tradition and Its Problems 25

1.4 Essentialism and the State's Educational Vision 26

1.5 Critical Pedagogy and the Freireian Tradition 27

1.6 Islamic Philosophy of Education and Its Contemporary Relevance 27

1.7 The Tagoreian Tradition and Its Forgotten Relevance 28

Chapter Two: The Architecture of History -- Education in Bengal from Ancient Times to Colonial Modernity 29

2.1 Before the British: Indigenous Education in Ancient Bengal 29

2.2 The Colonial Intervention: Macaulay, Filtration, and the Making of a Colonized Mind 30

2.3 The Wood's Dispatch, Hunter Commission, and the Making of a System 32

2.4 The Language Movement and the Philosophy of Linguistic Identity 32

2.5 The Pakistan Period: Educational Ideology and the East Bengal Experience 33

2.6 Independence and the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission (1974) 34

2.7 Military Rule and the Transformation of Educational Ideology 35

2.8 Democratic Restoration and the Education Policy of 2010 36

Chapter Three: The Structural Architecture of Bangladesh's Education System 37

3.1 The Three-Stream System: A Structural Overview 37

3.2 The General Education Stream 37

3.3 The Madrasa Education Stream 38

3.4 English-Medium Education: The Elite Track 39

3.5 Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET): The Neglected Stream 40

Chapter Four: The Legal and Constitutional Framework of Education 41

4.1 Education as a Constitutional Right: Text, Interpretation, and Reality 41

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

4.2 The Primary Education Act and Compulsory Education 42
4.3 The Legal Framework for Private Universities and Higher Education 42
4.4 Teacher Rights, Employment Law, and the Politics of Teacher Registration 43
4.5 Jurisprudential Analysis: Education, Equality, and the Constitutional Promise 44
Chapter Five: The Political Economy of Education 45
5.1 Financing Education: The Budget and Its Discontents 45
5.2 The Political Economy of Educational Investment 46
5.3 The Private Financing of Education: A Paradox of Poverty 47
5.4 Human Capital Theory and Its Limits in the Bangladeshi Context 47
5.5 Presidential and Political Analysis: Education as a Political Arena 48
Chapter Six: The Pedagogical Traditions and Theories That Shape the Classroom 50
6.1 What Happens Inside the Classroom: The Practice of Teaching 50
6.2 Behaviorism and Its Long Shadow 50
6.3 Constructivism: Piaget, Vygotsky, and the New Curriculum 51
6.4 The 2023 Curriculum Reform: An In-Depth Analysis 52
6.5 The Problem of Teacher Quality: The Central Constraint 54
6.6 The Examination System: Assessment as Social Control 55
Chapter Seven: Comparative Analysis -- Bangladesh in the Global Educational Landscape 56
7.1 The Comparative Method in Educational Analysis 56
7.2 Bangladesh and South Asian Comparisons 56
7.3 International Comparisons: The East Asian Development Model 57
7.4 The BRAC Model: A Bangladeshi Innovation for the World 58
7.5 Finland: The International Reference Point for Educational Excellence 59
Chapter Eight: The Psychology of Learning in the Bangladeshi Classroom 59
8.1 Cognitive Psychology and the Reality of Bangladeshi Schools 59
8.2 Motivational Psychology and the Problem of Examination Anxiety 60
8.3 Developmental Psychology and the Structure of the System 61
8.4 Socio-cultural Psychology: Learning in Context 62
Chapter Nine: Gender, Education, and the Paradoxes of Progress 63
9.1 The Achievement of Gender Parity: A Remarkable Story 63
9.2 Beyond Parity: The Persistence of Gendered Educational Experience 63

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

9.3 STEM Education and Gender: A Global Problem with Local Dimensions 64
Chapter Ten: Problems, Crises, and the Anatomy of Systemic Failure 65
10.1 The Learning Crisis: What Students Are Not Learning 65
10.2 The Equity Crisis: Who Gets What Education 65
10.3 Corruption, Governance Failure, and Institutional Decay 66
10.4 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Educational Legacy 66
10.5 Student Politics and the Crisis of Higher Education 67
Chapter Eleven: Recent Developments, The Post-2024 Landscape, and The Road Forward 68
11.1 The Revolution of August 2024 and Its Educational Implications 68
11.2 The 2025-2026 Budget and the Question of Investment 69
11.3 Digital Education and the Fourth Industrial Revolution 69
11.4 Climate Education and Environmental Challenges 69
Conclusion to Part One: The Weight of the Inheritance and the Challenge of Transformation 70
PART TWO: THE SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH 71
Class, Community, Culture, and the Social Architecture of Learning 71
Prologue to Part Two: Reading Education Through the Social Lens 71
Chapter One: The Social Class Structure of Schooling and the Reproduction of Hierarchy 73
1.1 Bourdieu in Bangladesh: Social Reproduction and Educational Capital 73
1.2 The Three-Stream System as Class Segregation 74
1.3 The Coaching Industry as a Class Mechanism 74
1.4 Social Mobility, Credential Inflation, and the Diploma Disease 75
1.5 The Political Economy of Educational Access: Who Benefits and Who Pays 76
Chapter Two: The Anthropology of the Classroom: Culture, Power, and the Hidden Curriculum 77
2.1 The Concept of the Hidden Curriculum 77
2.2 Classroom Culture and the Pedagogy of Silence 78
2.3 The Culture of the Body: Corporal Punishment, Discipline, and the Embodied School 79
2.4 Teacher Authority and the Cultural Construction of Expertise 79
2.5 The School as Community Institution: Social Functions Beyond Education 80
Chapter Three: Language, Identity, and the Sociology of Educational Language Policy 81
3.1 The Language Question as a National Obsession 81

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

3.2 The Politics of Bengali-Medium Education 82
3.3 English and the Grammar of Social Distinction 82
3.4 Arabic, Urdu, and the Languages of Religious Identity 84
3.5 Mother Tongue Education and the Unresolved Question of Linguistic Diversity 84
Chapter Four: Gender, Family, and the Social Construction of Educational Aspiration 85
4.1 The Gender Revolution in Bangladesh's Education: Achievement and Contradiction 85
4.2 The Hidden Inequalities of Nominal Gender Parity 86
4.3 Patriarchy, Purdah, and the Geography of Female Educational Aspiration 87
4.4 The Sociology of Educational Aspiration: How Families Make Educational Decisions 87
4.5 Educational Aspiration in the Garment Worker Community: A Sociological Case Study . 88
Chapter Five: Religion, Community, and the Sociology of the Three-Stream System 89
5.1 The Sociology of Religious Educational Choice 89
5.2 The Aliya Madrasa System: Between Integration and Distinctiveness 90
5.3 The Qawmi Movement: Identity, Authority, and Political Power 90
5.4 Secularism, Religion, and the Constitutional Politics of Educational Identity 91
Chapter Six: Rural-Urban Dynamics and the Geography of Educational Inequality 92
6.1 The Spatial Sociology of Educational Opportunity 92
6.2 The Rural School: Infrastructure, Teacher Absence, and Institutional Resilience 93
6.3 The Char, Haor, and Hill Tracts: Education at the Margins 93
6.4 Urbanization, Migration, and the Education of the Urban Poor 94
Chapter Seven: The Sociology of Teacher Identity and Professional Culture 95
7.1 Who Becomes a Teacher in Bangladesh? 95
7.2 Teacher Training and its Discontents: The Gap Between Theory and Practice 96
7.3 The Political Economy of the Teaching Profession: Pay, Conditions, and the Problem of Motivation 96
7.4 The Gendered Dynamics of the Teaching Workforce 97
Chapter Eight: The Anthropology of Examination Culture 98
8.1 Examinations as Cultural Events 98
8.2 The Economics and Ethics of Examination Leakage 99
8.3 The Psychological Consequences of Examination Pressure 100
8.4 Reform of the Assessment System: International Debates and Bangladeshi Context 100
Chapter Nine: Migration, Diaspora, and Transnational Educational Dynamics 101

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

9.1 The Bangladeshi Diaspora and Its Educational Dimensions 101

9.2 The Rohingya Crisis and Its Educational Emergency 102

9.3 Brain Drain, Brain Gain, and the International Circulation of Educational Human Capital 103

Chapter Ten: The Sociology of Educational Reform: Why Change is Hard 103

10.1 The Political Sociology of Reform Resistance 103

10.2 The Bureaucratic Culture of Educational Administration 104

10.3 The Role of Civil Society in Educational Change 105

10.4 International Organizations and the Paradox of Educational Aid 106

Chapter Eleven: Indigenous Communities, Ethnicity, and Educational Marginalization 107

11.1 The Indigenous Communities of Bangladesh: A Demographic Overview 107

11.2 The Political History of Indigenous Education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts 107

11.3 The Rights-Based Framework for Indigenous Education 108

11.4 Ethnicity, Identity, and Educational Achievement: A Comparative Analysis 109

Conclusion to Part Two: The Social Architecture of an Educational System in Transformation 109

Supplementary Commentary: Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application to Bangladeshi Educational Reality 110

A Note on Theory and Method 110

Recent Theoretical Developments: 2024-2026 112

The Examination of Administrative Jurisprudence in Educational Governance 113

The Presidential and Political Dimensions of Educational Leadership 114

Postscript: Toward a Synthesis 115

PART THREE: THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH, 1971 TO THE PRESENT 116

Power, Ideology, and the Contested Architecture of a National Education System 116

Prologue to Part Three: Politics as Educational Destiny 116

Chapter One: Independence and Aspiration: The Educational Vision of the Founding Republic, 1971 to 1975 117

1.1 The Weight of the Beginning: Education in the Context of Liberation 117

1.2 The Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission and the Vision of Educational Nationalism 117

1.3 From Vision to (Non-)Implementation: The Political Economy of the 1970s 118

1.4 The Constitutional Framework of Education: 1972 and Its Legacy 119

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

Chapter Two: The Military Turn and the Islamic Reorientation: Education Under Ziaur Rahman, 1975 to 1981 120

2.1 The Coup, the Counter-Coup, and the Remaking of Bangladesh 120

2.2 Educational Policy as Ideological Reconstruction 121

2.3 The National Education Commission of 1978 and the Shift of Priorities 121

2.4 The Political Sociology of the Islamic Educational Turn 122

Chapter Three: The Ershad Period: Institutional Expansion and Ideological Consolidation, 1982 to 1990 123

3.1 The Ershad Government and Its Educational Agenda 123

3.2 The Majid Commission and Educational Decentralization 123

3.3 The Mass Movement and Educational Demands: The End of the Ershad Era 124

Chapter Four: The Democratic Transition and the Politics of Educational Reform, 1991 to 2000 124

4.1 The Restoration of Democracy and the Educational Agenda 124

4.2 The Female Secondary School Assistance Program: Politics and Policy Success 125

4.3 The Communicative Language Teaching Reform: A Pedagogical and Political Failure 126

4.4 The Growth of Private Education and the English-Medium Sector 127

Chapter Five: Governance, Quality, and the Politics of Examination: The 2000s 127

5.1 The BNP-Jamaat Government and Educational Politics, 2001 to 2006 127

5.2 The Caretaker Government, Electoral Reform, and the Education Sector, 2007 to 2008 128

Chapter Six: The Hasina Era: Ambition, Achievement, and Authoritarian Drift, 2009 to 2024 129

6.1 Digital Bangladesh and the Modernization Vision of Education 129

6.2 The National Curriculum Framework 2012 and the Road to Reform 129

6.3 Textbook Politics and the War of Historical Memory 130

6.4 The Examination System in Crisis: Leakage, Grade Inflation, and the GPA Arms Race 131

6.5 The Relationship with the Madrasa Sector: Accommodation and Conflict 132

6.6 University Governance and the Politicization of Higher Education 132

6.7 The National Education Policy 2010 and the Question of Implementation 133

Chapter Seven: The 2023 Curriculum Reform: Philosophy, Politics, and Controversy 134

7.1 The Origins and Architecture of the Reform 134

7.2 The Philosophical Foundations: Strengths and Limitations 135

7.3 The Political Context of Implementation: A Reform Under Siege 135

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

7.4 The Political Fate of the 2023 Reform After August 2024 136

Chapter Eight: The Revolution of 2024: Students, Politics, and the Educational Crisis of a Generation 137

8.1 The Quota Movement: Education, Employment, and the Politics of Opportunity 137

8.2 The Deeper Educational Grievances: Quality, Accountability, and Freedom 138

8.3 The Educational Demands of the Post-Revolution Period 138

Chapter Nine: The Interim Government and the Emerging Post-2024 Educational Landscape 139

9.1 Muhammad Yunus and the Educational Agenda of the Interim Government 139

9.2 The BNP's Educational Manifesto and Its Implementation Challenges 139

9.3 The 2025-2026 Educational Budget: Investment, Priorities, and Constraints 140

Chapter Ten: Comparative Political Analysis: Bangladesh in Regional and Global Context 140

10.1 The Political Economy of Educational Development: Comparative Lessons 140

10.2 International Educational Rights Law and Bangladesh's Obligations 141

10.3 The Washington Consensus, Post-Washington Consensus, and Bangladeshi Educational Policy 142

Chapter Eleven: The Future of Educational Politics in Bangladesh: Structural Challenges and Reform Possibilities 143

11.1 The Enduring Structural Challenges 143

11.2 The Reform Possibilities of the Present Moment 144

11.3 The Political Philosophy of Educational Reform: Rights, Justice, and Democratic Governance 144

11.4 Toward a Political Economy of Educational Transformation 145

Conclusion to Part Three: The Weight of Political History and the Possibility of Educational Democracy 146

PART FOUR: CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY, AND THE CONTESTED ARCHITECTURE OF KNOWLEDGE 147

The Intellectual Core of Bangladesh's Educational System 147

Prologue to Part Four: The Question That Will Not Go Away 147

Chapter One: The Philosophy of Curriculum: From Tyler to Freire to the Constructivist Revolution 148

1.1 The Founding Problematic of Curriculum Theory 148

1.2 The Reconceptualist Challenge: Curriculum as Lived Experience 149

1.3 Bloom's Taxonomy, Competency Frameworks, and the Psychological Architecture of Curriculum 151

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

1.4 Vygotsky, Social Constructivism, and the Theory of the Zone of Proximal Development 152

1.5 Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Its Curriculum Implications 153

1.6 William Doll's Post-Modern Curriculum Theory and the Complexity Revolution 154

1.7 African and Asian Contributions to Curriculum Philosophy: Ubuntu, Confucian Pedagogy, and the Limits of Eurocentric Theory 155

Chapter Two: The National Curriculum and Textbook Board: Institution, Power, and the Politics of Knowledge Production 156

2.1 The Institutional History of Curriculum Making in Bangladesh 156

2.2 The Political Economy of Textbook Production 157

2.3 Textbook Content Analysis: What Children in Bangladesh Actually Learn 158

2.4 The NCTB's Research Capacity and International Benchmarking 158

Chapter Three: The 2023 Curriculum Reform: Vision, Ambition, and the Anatomy of Contested Change 159

3.1 The Origins of the Reform: From NCF 2012 to the New Curriculum Framework 159

3.2 The Philosophical Architecture of the New Curriculum 160

3.3 The Assessment Revolution and Its Consequences 161

3.4 Textbook Controversies and the Religious Politics of the New Curriculum 161

Chapter Four: The 2025 Reversal: Interim Government, Curriculum Politics, and the Question of Educational Continuity 162

4.1 The August 2024 Revolution and Its Educational Aftermath 163

4.2 The Decision to Revert: Political Logic and Educational Consequences 163

4.3 The 2025 Curriculum Review: Toward a New Framework 164

4.4 The Jurisprudence of Curriculum Change: Legal Constraints and Constitutional Obligations 165

Chapter Five: Theories of Learning and Their Application to Bangladesh's Classroom Reality 165

5.1 The Learning Sciences and Their Relevance to Bangladesh 165

5.2 Spaced Repetition, Retrieval Practice, and the Science of Long-Term Learning 166

5.3 Motivation Theory, Self-Determination, and the Bangladesh Classroom 167

5.4 The Neuroscience of Learning, Stress, and the Bangladesh Examination Experience 168

Chapter Six: The Pedagogy of Examinations: Assessment Theory, Practice, and the Crisis of Measurement 169

6.1 The Theory of Educational Assessment: What Are We Actually Measuring? 169

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

6.2 The Standard-Setting Challenge: Cut Scores, Grade Inflation, and the Inflation of Credentials 170

6.3 Examination Boards, Governance, and the Accountability Gap 170

6.4 The Abolition of PEC and JSC: An Assessment of the Assessment Reform 171

Chapter Seven: Language, Medium of Instruction, and the Epistemological Politics of the Classroom 172

7.1 The Language Question as a Philosophical Problem 172

7.2 The English Language Question: Between Global Competitiveness and Educational Equity 173

7.3 The Arabic and Persian Languages in the Madrasa Curriculum 173

Chapter Eight: Religious Education, Secular Knowledge, and the Curriculum's Philosophical Fault Lines 174

8.1 The Problem of Religious Education in a Modern State 174

8.2 The Madrasa Curriculum and the Question of Educational Bifurcation 175

8.3 Comparative Analysis: Religious Education in Other Muslim-Majority Countries 176

8.4 The Philosophical Challenge of Integrating Religious and Secular Knowledge 176

Chapter Nine: Digital Pedagogy, Artificial Intelligence, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution in Bangladesh's Schools 177

9.1 The Digital Transformation of Education: Global Context and Bangladesh's Position 177

9.2 Artificial Intelligence in Education: Potential, Risk, and the Bangladesh Context 178

9.3 Digital Infrastructure, Equity, and the Rural-Urban Divide 179

9.4 Educational Technology Research and Evidence: What Works in Low-Resource Contexts 180

Chapter Ten: The Economics of Curriculum: Human Capital Theory, Returns to Education, and the Market Logic of Knowledge 180

10.1 Human Capital Theory and Its Dominance in Educational Economics 181

10.2 The Critique of Human Capital Theory: Sen, Nussbaum, and the Capabilities Approach 181

10.3 The Private Returns to Education and the Coaching Industry's Economics 182

10.4 The Social Returns to Education and the Public Investment Case 183

Chapter Eleven: Legal and Jurisprudential Dimensions of Curriculum: Rights, Obligations, and Constitutional Commitments 183

11.1 The Constitutional Right to Education: Text, Interpretation, and Practice 184

11.2 International Human Rights Law and Educational Obligations 184

11.3 The Legal Framework for Private Education: Regulation, Rights, and the Market 185

11.4 Administrative Law and the Rights of Students and Teachers 186

Chapter Twelve: Comparative Curriculum Analysis: Bangladesh in Global and Regional Perspective 186

12.1 The Comparative Method in Educational Analysis: Principles and Pitfalls 186

12.2 Curriculum and Education in South Asia: India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka 187

12.3 East Asian Educational Systems: Lessons from Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore 188

12.4 Finland's Educational Miracle and Its (Partial) Lessons for Bangladesh 189

12.5 The OECD's Education 2030 Framework and Global Curriculum Trends 190

Conclusion to Part Four: The Curriculum as the Civilizational Mirror 191

Supplementary Analytical Section: Presidential and Political Commentary on Curriculum Governance 193

PART FIVE: THE TEACHER IN BANGLADESH'S EDUCATIONAL CIVILIZATION 194

Formation, Identity, Practice, and the Politics of the Profession 194

Prologue to Part Five: The Teacher at the Center of Everything 194

Chapter One: The Philosophy of Teaching: What Does It Mean to Teach? 196

1.1 Teaching as a Moral and Intellectual Practice 196

1.2 Lee Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge and the Professional Knowledge of Teaching 197

1.3 The Reflective Practitioner: Schon's Model and Its Implications 198

1.4 The Philosophy of Teacher Identity: Vocation, Profession, and Occupation 199

Chapter Two: The Social History of Teaching in Bangladesh: From Guru to Government Employee 200

2.1 The Pre-Colonial Teacher: Social Embededness and Moral Authority 200

2.2 The Colonial Transformation: From Social Embedded Authority to Bureaucratic Employee 201

2.3 Post-Independence Development of the Teaching Profession 202

Chapter Three: Pre-Service Teacher Education: The Architecture of Initial Formation 203

3.1 The Institutional Landscape of Initial Teacher Education 203

3.2 The C-in-Ed Curriculum: What Primary Teachers Learn and What They Need 204

3.3 The B.Ed. Program and the Formation of Secondary Teachers 205

3.4 The Pedagogy of Teacher Education: A Structural Contradiction 206

Chapter Four: In-Service Teacher Development: The Architecture of Professional Growth 206

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4.1 The System of In-Service Training: NAPE, NAEM, and the Problem of Reach 206

4.2 The Teacher Portal and Technology-Enabled Professional Development 207

4.3 School-Based Professional Development: The Community of Practice Model 208

4.4 The Teacher Ambassador Program and Peer Learning Networks 209

Chapter Five: The Political Economy of Teaching: Pay, Conditions, and the Structural Determinants of Quality 210

5.1 Teacher Salaries and the Economics of Professional Attractiveness 210

5.2 The Private Tutoring Economy and Its Implications for Teacher Integrity 211

5.3 Absenteeism and the Problem of Accountability 212

5.4 Teacher Deployment and the Geography of Inequality 213

Chapter Six: Psychological Dimensions of Teaching in Bangladesh: Identity, Burnout, and Resilience 213

6.1 Teacher Motivation Theory and Its Application to Bangladesh 214

6.2 Burnout in the Teaching Profession 214

6.3 Teacher Resilience and the Conditions That Sustain Professional Commitment 215

6.4 The Emotional Labor of Teaching and its Cultural Dimensions 216

Chapter Seven: Teaching in the Madrasa System: A Parallel Professional World 216

7.1 The Madrasa Teacher: Social Role, Professional Formation, and Institutional Context .. 216

7.2 The Pedagogical Methods of the Classical Madrasa Tradition 217

7.3 The Feminization of Madrasa Education and the Female Teacher 218

Chapter Eight: Teacher Education Reform: International Models and Bangladesh's Options .. 219

8.1 The Finnish Model of Teacher Education: Selection, Research, and Autonomy 219

8.2 The Singapore Model: Teacher Selection, Structured Development, and Performance Management 220

8.3 The Brazilian Lesson: Investing in Teacher Education at Scale 221

8.4 India's Teacher Education Reform: Lessons from the National Council for Teacher Education 221

Chapter Nine: Teacher Governance, Accountability, and Professional Standards 222

9.1 The Framework of Teacher Accountability in Bangladesh 222

9.2 Teacher Professional Standards: The Development of a Competency Framework 223

9.3 Teacher Registration, Licensing, and the Regulation of Entry to the Profession 224

9.4 Teacher Performance Management: The Challenge of Measuring What Matters 224

Chapter Ten: The Teacher in the Digital Age: New Demands, New Opportunities, New Challenges 225

10.1 The Transformation of the Teacher's Role in the Digital Learning Ecology 225

10.2 Digital Literacy as Teacher Competence 226

10.3 AI Tutors, Adaptive Learning, and the Minimum Viable Teacher 227

10.4 Teacher Unions, Collective Action, and Professional Advocacy in the Digital Age 227

Chapter Eleven: Gender, Teaching, and the Feminization of the Profession 228

11.1 The Feminization of Primary Teaching: Dynamics, Causes, and Consequences 228

11.2 Gender Discrimination in Teacher Career Progression 229

11.3 Male Teacher Recruitment: A Countertrend and Its Implications 229

11.4 Women's Leadership in Education: Breaking the Glass Ceiling 230

Chapter Twelve: Toward a New Professional Framework for Bangladesh's Teachers 230

12.1 The Vision: Teaching as the Most Important Profession 230

12.2 The Reform Architecture: A Phased Approach to Systemic Transformation 231

12.3 The Legal and Constitutional Framework for Teacher Reform 232

12.4 The Political Sociology of Teacher Reform: Why It Is Difficult and How to Make It Possible 232

Conclusion to Part Five: The Teacher as the System's Most Critical Resource 234

PART SIX: THE UNIVERSITY AND THE NATION 236

Higher Education, Knowledge, Power, and the Crisis of Academic Life in Bangladesh 236

Prologue to Part Six: The University as a Mirror 236

Chapter One: The Philosophy of Higher Education and the Question of Bangladesh 238

1.1 Three Models of What a University Is For 238

1.2 The Postcolonial University and Its Contradictions 240

1.3 The Islamic Philosophical Tradition and Higher Education 240

1.4 Sen and Nussbaum: The Capability Approach and Higher Education 241

Chapter Two: Historical Architecture -- From the Vihara to the Vice-Chancellor 242

2.1 Ancient Centers of Higher Learning in Bengal 242

2.2 The Islamic Tradition of Higher Learning in Bengal 243

2.3 The Colonial University: Dhaka University and Its Founding Contradictions 243

2.4 The Post-Independence Expansion and Its Consequences 244

Chapter Three: The Public University -- Sanctuary of Knowledge or Arena of Power? 245

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3.1 The Structure and Organization of Public Universities 245
3.2 The Pathology of Vice-Chancellors 246
3.3 Campus Politics and the Culture of Violence 247
3.4 Academic Quality in the Public Universities: An Honest Assessment 248
Chapter Four: The Private University Revolution -- Markets, Quality, and Social Consequence 249
4.1 The Origins and Expansion of Private Universities 249
4.2 The Business Model and Its Consequences 249
4.3 Private Universities and the Reproduction of Social Inequality 250
4.4 The National University and the Millions Left Behind 251
Chapter Five: The University Grants Commission and the Architecture of Higher Education Governance 251
5.1 The UGC: Design, Function, and Failure 252
5.2 The Proposed Bangladesh Higher Education Commission: A New Beginning? 252
5.3 University Autonomy and Its Constitutional Dimensions 253
Chapter Six: The Political Economy of Higher Education -- Who Pays, Who Benefits, Who Decides 254
6.1 Financing Higher Education: The Crisis of Chronic Underfunding 254
6.2 The Human Capital Framework and Its Limitations 255
6.3 The Economics of Brain Drain and the Crisis of Academic Talent 256
6.4 The International Development Community and Its Role 257
Chapter Seven: Research, Knowledge Production, and the Crisis of Academic Life 258
7.1 The Research Deficit and Its Causes 258
7.2 The Predatory Journal Crisis 258
7.3 The Relationship Between Research and Teaching 259
Chapter Eight: Quality Assurance and Accreditation -- Between Standards and Compliance 260
8.1 The Quality Assurance Framework 260
8.2 International Accreditation and Its Significance 261
8.3 The Accreditation Council: Proposal and Reality 261
Chapter Nine: Higher Education and the Labor Market -- The Graduate Unemployment Crisis 262
9.1 The Scale of the Crisis 262

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9.2 The Skills Mismatch: Causes and Dimensions 262

9.3 The Structural Unemployment Problem 263

9.4 Graduate Emigration and its Complex Consequences 263

Chapter Ten: The Digital Transformation of Higher Education -- Promise, Progress, and the Persistence of the Divide 264

10.1 COVID-19 as an Accelerator 264

10.2 The Promise of Open and Distance Learning 265

10.3 Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Higher Education 265

10.4 The Digital Divide and Higher Education Equity 266

Chapter Eleven: Comparative Perspectives -- What Bangladesh Can Learn and What It Teaches 267

11.1 The East Asian Model: South Korea, Japan, and Singapore 267

11.2 The Indian Example: Reforms, IITs, and the Mixed Record 268

11.3 The Finnish Paradox: Small System, Global Excellence 268

11.4 Learning from Vietnam: A Developing Country Comparator 269

Chapter Twelve: The Reform Agenda -- What Bangladesh's Higher Education Needs 270

12.1 The Political Moment and Its Possibilities 270

12.2 A Ten-Point Reform Agenda for Higher Education 270

12.3 The Constitutional and Legal Framework for Reform 273

12.4 The Role of Academic Communities in Driving Reform 273

Conclusion to Part Six: The University Bangladesh Deserves 274

Supplementary Analytical Commentary: The Rohingya Crisis and Higher Education 275

PART SEVEN: THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM 276

Assessment, Accountability, Anxiety, and the Pathology of the Pass Rate 276

Prologue to Part Seven: The Examination as the System's Mirror 276

Chapter One: The Philosophy of Educational Assessment -- What Are Examinations For? 277

1.1 The Multiple Purposes of Educational Assessment 278

1.2 Classical Theories of Measurement and Their Educational Application 279

1.3 Item Response Theory and the Bangladeshi Context 280

1.4 Vygotsky, Zone of Proximal Development, and the Failure of Static Assessment 280

Chapter Two: The Architecture of Bangladesh's Examination System -- Design, History, and Administration 281

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2.1 The Structure of Public Examinations 281
2.2 The Historical Development of the Examination System 282
2.3 The GPA System and the Era of Grade Inflation 283
2.4 Administrative Structure and Its Weaknesses 284
Chapter Three: The Question Paper Leak -- An Epidemic with Deep Roots 285
3.1 The Scale and History of the Leak Problem 285
3.2 The Legal Framework: Laws, Enforcement, and Their Limits 286
3.3 The Sociology of Cheating: Why It Happens and Who It Serves 286
3.4 The International Context: Comparative Perspectives on Examination Fraud 287
Chapter Four: The Coaching Center Complex -- Shadow Education and Its Consequences 288
4.1 The Shadow Education System 288
4.2 The Conflict of Interest Problem 289
4.3 Coaching, Equity, and the Reproduction of Advantage 289
Chapter Five: The Psychological Dimensions of the Examination Culture 290
5.1 Examination Anxiety and Its Effects 290
5.2 Learned Helplessness and the Banking Model 291
5.3 The Psychology of Grade Inflation and Expectation Management 291
5.4 Self-Determination Theory and the Motivation Crisis 292
Chapter Six: The Curriculum-Examination Relationship -- When Assessment Drives Learning 293
6.1 The Backwash Effect 293
6.2 The 2023 Curriculum Reform and Its Examination Implications 293
6.3 The English Language Examination Problem 294
Chapter Seven: University Admission Examinations -- The Second Tournament 295
7.1 The Architecture of University Admission 295
7.2 The Case for a Unified National University Admission Test 296
7.3 Admission Examination Fraud and Its Institutional Dimensions 296
Chapter Eight: Comparative Assessment -- What the International Evidence Teaches 297
8.1 PISA, TIMSS, and Bangladesh's Place in Global Assessment 297
8.2 Finland's Assessment Philosophy: What the Contrast Reveals 298
8.3 The East Asian Examination Cultures: Cautionary Tales and Success Stories 299
Chapter Nine: Legal and Constitutional Dimensions of the Examination System 300

Copyright © 2026 Commentaries on The Education System of Bangladesh by S M Nazmuz Sakib

9.1 The Legal Framework for Public Examinations 300
9.2 The Right to Education and the Right to Fair Assessment 300
9.3 Examination Law Reform: What Is Needed 301
Chapter Ten: Toward a Reformed Assessment System -- Principles and Priorities 301
10.1 The Case for Comprehensive Examination Reform 301
10.2 A Differentiated Assessment Architecture 302
10.3 The Technology of Assessment Reform 303
10.4 Teacher Assessment and Professional Accountability 303
Conclusion to Part Seven: The Examination We Deserve 304
PART EIGHT: THE LANGUAGE QUESTION 306
Bangla, English, Indigenous Tongues, Arabic, and the Politics of Linguistic Power in Bangladeshi Education 306
Prologue to Part Eight: Why Language Is Never Just Language 306
Chapter One: The Philosophy of Language in Education -- Foundations, Frameworks, and Fundamental Questions 307
1.1 Language and Mind: The Philosophical Backdrop 308
1.2 The Political Philosophy of Language: Rawls, Taylor, and the Claims of Linguistic Community 309
1.3 The Economics of Language: Human Capital Theory and Its Limitations 310
1.4 Language and Identity: The Linguistic Turn in Educational Philosophy 311
Chapter Two: The Historical Architecture of Language Policy in Bangladesh 312
2.1 The Language Movement and Its Ambiguous Legacy 312
2.2 Language Policy from Independence to the Khuda Commission 313
2.3 Military Rule, Islamization, and the Language Question: 1975-1990 314
2.4 The 1990s: Democratic Return, English Fever, and the Globalization Context 315
2.5 The National Education Policy 2010 and Its Language Provisions 315
Chapter Three: Bangla as National Language and Medium of Instruction -- Achievements, Failures, and Philosophical Challenges 316
3.1 The Constitutional Status of Bangla and Its Educational Implications 316
3.2 The Quality of Bangla Language Teaching: A System Under Scrutiny 317
3.3 Bangla in Higher Education: The Unfinished Revolution 318
Chapter Four: The English Question -- Colonial Legacy, Economic Necessity, and the Politics of Linguistic Capital 319

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4.1 The Historical Roots of English's Position in Bangladesh 319
4.2 The Structure of English Medium Education in Bangladesh 320
4.3 The Politics of English in Post-2024 Bangladesh 321
4.4 Communicative Language Teaching and Its Failure in Bangladesh 321
4.5 English Proficiency Data and the Evidence of Failure 322
Chapter Five: The Three-Tier System and Its Social Consequences 323
5.1 The Architecture of Inequality: How the Three Tracks Function 323
5.2 Social Stratification and Linguistic Capital: The Bourdieusian Analysis 324
5.3 The Madrasa System: A Third World of Language 325
Chapter Six: Indigenous Languages and the Educational Rights of Linguistic Minorities 326
6.1 The Scale of the Problem 326
6.2 The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Program: Achievements and Limitations 327
6.3 The Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Special Case 328
6.4 International Legal Framework: The Rights of Linguistic Minorities in Education 329
6.5 Comparative Perspectives: What Works in MTB-MLE Programs 330
Chapter Seven: Arabic in the Madrasa Tradition -- Language, Theology, and the Question of Modernity 330
7.1 The Sacred Language and Its Educational Role 330
7.2 The Gap Between Classical Arabic and Contemporary Arabic 331
7.3 Reform of Arabic Instruction: Debates and Directions 332
Chapter Eight: Comparative Analysis -- Language in Education Across South and Southeast Asia 333
8.1 The Regional Context: Language Diversity and Educational Policy 333
8.2 Sri Lanka: The Lessons of Language Wars 334
8.3 Malaysia: Managed Multilingualism in a Diverse Society 334
8.4 The Philippines and the MTB-MLE Experience 335
Chapter Nine: Legal and Constitutional Dimensions of Language in Education 336
9.1 The Constitutional Framework 336
9.2 The Right to Education Act and Language 336
9.3 International Legal Obligations and Domestic Implementation 337
9.4 Language Policy and the Rule of Law 337

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Chapter Ten: Toward a Democratic Language Policy for Bangladesh's Education 338
10.1 The Principles of a Democratic Language Policy 338
10.2 Specific Reform Priorities 339
10.3 The Role of Teachers in Language Reform 341
10.4 Technology and Language in Education 341
10.5 Political Economy of Language Reform 342
Conclusion to Part Eight: Language, Justice, and the Future of Education in Bangladesh 343
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING FOR PART EIGHT 347
PART NINE: THE ARCHITECTURE OF ASPIRATION 348
Higher Education in Bangladesh -- Expansion, Governance, Crisis, and the Possibility of Reform 348
Prologue to Part Nine: The University and the Nation 348
Chapter One: Philosophical Foundations of the University -- What Higher Education Is For ... 349
1.1 The Classic Ideal and Its Contested Relevance 349
1.2 Human Capital Theory and the Instrumentalization of Higher Education 350
1.3 The University as Democratic Institution 352
1.4 Postcolonial Critiques and the Decolonization of the University 353
Chapter Two: The Historical Architecture of Higher Education in Bangladesh 354
2.1 From Dhaka University to the Multi-Campus System: An Overview 354
2.2 The National University and the Affiliated College System: A Crisis of Scale 355
2.3 The Expansion of Private Universities: Promise and Performance 356
2.4 The University Grants Commission: Regulatory Architecture and Its Failures 358
Chapter Three: The Crisis of University Governance -- Politicization, Patronage, and the Subversion of Academic Life 359
3.1 The Architecture of Politicization 359
3.2 The Teacher Party System and Its Academic Consequences 360
3.3 Student Politics: Historical Significance and Contemporary Degeneration 361
3.4 Academic Freedom: The Legal Framework and Its Violation 362
Chapter Four: Research and Innovation -- The Intellectual Poverty of the Bangladeshi Academy 363
4.1 Research as Vocation and Institution 363
4.2 The Brain Drain and the International Research Community 365

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4.3 Research Policy and the Strategic Plan for Higher Education 365
Chapter Five: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and the Labor Market -- The Relevance Crisis 366
5.1 The Mismatch Between Higher Education and the Economy 366
5.2 Curriculum Reform and Its Obstacles 367
5.3 The Liberal Arts Question 368
Chapter Six: The Economics of Higher Education -- Financing, Access, and Equity 369
6.1 The Public Finance of Higher Education 369
6.2 The Private University Fee Structure and Access 370
6.3 The Political Economy of Private University Expansion 371
Chapter Seven: Specialized Higher Education -- Technical, Agricultural, and Professional Universities 372
7.1 The Technical University Sector: BUET and Its Cousins 372
7.2 Agricultural Universities and Rural Development 372
7.3 Distance Education and Open University 373
Chapter Eight: Higher Education and Democratic Values -- The University as Civic Institution 374
8.1 Academic Freedom and Democratic Culture 374
8.2 The University and Civil Society 375
8.3 The Dhaka University Legacy and Its Future 375
Chapter Nine: Legal and Constitutional Dimensions of Higher Education 376
9.1 The Legislative Framework 376
9.2 Autonomy, Accountability, and the Legal Definition of the University 377
9.3 The Right to Higher Education and Its Legal Dimensions 378
9.4 Intellectual Property and Academic Knowledge 378
Chapter Ten: Toward a Vision of Reformed Higher Education in Bangladesh 379
10.1 The Reformers' Dilemma 379
10.2 The Post-2024 Opportunity and Its Limits 379
10.3 Institutional Design for Academic Autonomy 380
10.4 Research Investment and the National Research Council 381
10.5 Access, Equity, and the Student Loan System 381
10.6 The National University Reform 382
Conclusion to Part Nine: The University Bangladesh Deserves 383

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PART TEN: SYNTHESIS, REFORM, AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL IN BANGLADESH 386

Prologue to Part Ten: The Question That Will Not Go Away 386

Chapter One: The Synthesis of Philosophy and System - Returning to First Principles 387

Chapter Two: The Political Economy of Educational Stagnation 391

Chapter Three: Decolonization of Knowledge and Curriculum - The Unfinished Project 395

Chapter Four: The Constitutional and Jurisprudential Foundations of Educational Rights 399

Chapter Five: Pedagogy at the Crossroads - What Bangladesh's Classrooms Need 402

Chapter Six: Comparative Perspectives - What Bangladesh Can Learn and What It Can Teach 405

Chapter Seven: The Digital Revolution, Artificial Intelligence, and Education in Bangladesh 409

Chapter Eight: The Governance Reform Imperative - Administration, Law, and Political Will 413

Chapter Nine: Presidential and Political Analysis - The Education-Power Nexus 416

Chapter Ten: Toward a Philosophy of Educational Renewal in Bangladesh 419

Conclusion to Part Ten and the Commentary: The Education Bangladesh Deserves 425

Supplementary Commentary: The Intersection of Climate Change and Education in Bangladesh . 426

Supplementary Commentary: The Rohingya Crisis and Its Educational Dimensions 427

Final Word: An Education That Believes in Children 428

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PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF AN EDUCATIONAL CIVILIZATION

Prologue to Part One: Why Bangladesh Matters

There is something profoundly instructive about studying the education system of Bangladesh. Here is a country that did not exist before 1971, a nation born in extraordinary violence and extraordinary aspiration, that has since managed to lift millions out of poverty, achieve near-universal primary enrollment, and sustain one of the most remarkable development stories of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. And yet, at the same time, it is a country where the education system remains structurally fragmented, philosophically incoherent, politically contested, and qualitatively deficient in ways that are well-documented and deeply troubling. Bangladesh, in other words, is a paradox wrapped inside an examination paper. It is a country where children go to school in enormous numbers but often learn very little. It is a country where governments speak eloquently about education as a national priority while consistently spending among the lowest percentages of GDP on education of any nation in the world. It is a country where three parallel educational systems coexist in a state of philosophical tension that mirrors the tensions in the society itself, tensions between the secular and the religious, between the Western and the indigenous, between modernity and tradition, between the state and the market.

To study the education system of Bangladesh is therefore not merely an exercise in educational administration or policy analysis. It is an encounter with the deepest questions that any society must ask of itself. What is education for? Who should receive it? In what language? According to whose values? Toward what conception of the human being and of the good society? These questions are not resolved in Bangladesh. They remain, decades after independence, fiercely alive and fiercely contested, manifesting in the design of textbooks, the structure of examinations, the content of teacher training, the allocation of budgets, and the corridors of ministerial power in Dhaka.

This textbook is a commentary. It does not simply describe. It interrogates. It asks hard questions and follows them into uncomfortable places. It draws on philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, history, law, political economy, and comparative educational science to construct a comprehensive, critical, and ultimately generative account of one of the most interesting and complex education systems in the world. The reader who finishes these pages should understand not only what the education system of Bangladesh is, but why it is the way it is, how it came to be so, what forces hold it in place, and what forces are working to change it.

Part One lays the foundations. It begins with philosophy, because without philosophy, educational analysis floats untethered from meaning. It then moves through history, because the present of any institution is incomprehensible without its past. It examines the structural architecture of the system, the legal and constitutional framework within which it operates, the political economy that funds and directs it, and the pedagogical philosophies that have shaped and continue to shape the experience of millions of Bangladeshi children in classrooms from the chars of the Brahmaputra to the high-rises of Dhaka.

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Chapter One: The Philosophy of Education and the Question of Bangladesh

1.1 What Philosophy Has to Do With It

Philosophy of education is not a luxury subject. It is not the theoretical ornamentation that professors add to practical curricula to make themselves feel important. Philosophy of education is the foundation upon which every educational decision ultimately rests. When a government decides that all children should attend school until the age of fourteen, it is making a philosophical claim about human development, about the relationship between the individual and the state, about the nature of knowledge and its proper distribution. When a curriculum designer decides that mathematics should be taught through problem-solving rather than memorization, a theory of learning and a theory of the human mind are embedded in that decision. When a school system separates children at the age of fourteen into science, arts, and commerce streams, a philosophical claim is being made about the nature of knowledge, about the relationship between academic learning and vocational preparation, and about social hierarchy and its reproduction.

The point is this: every educational system is built on philosophical foundations, whether or not the people who built it were aware of what those foundations were. The problem with the education system of Bangladesh, as with many postcolonial educational systems, is that the philosophical foundations are multiple, contradictory, often unexamined, and frequently borrowed from elsewhere without adequate reflection on whether they fit. The result is a system that does not quite know what it is for, a system pulled simultaneously in several directions by forces that rarely speak directly to one another.

To understand this, we need to engage with the major philosophical traditions that have shaped and continue to shape education in Bangladesh. These traditions are not purely academic. They are active forces in the real world. They shape the language in which educational debates are conducted, the criteria by which reforms are judged, and the aspirations that parents hold for their children.

1.2 The Perennialist Tradition and Its Shadows

Perennialism in education is the philosophical position that the primary purpose of education is to transmit the enduring truths of human civilization from one generation to the next. Associated with thinkers such as Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler in the Western tradition, and with the classical Islamic intellectual tradition in the context of Muslim societies, perennialism holds that there is a canon of knowledge, a body of great ideas, fundamental principles, and civilizational wisdom, that every educated person should know. Education is not primarily about cultivating individual creativity or responding to immediate social needs. It is about initiation into a tradition. It is about forming the mind and character of the student through sustained engagement with texts, ideas, and practices that have stood the test of time.

In Bangladesh, the perennialist impulse is most visible in the Madrasa educational system, which we will examine in considerable detail in subsequent chapters. The Aliya Madrasa system, the Qawmi Madrasa system, and the various hybrid forms that exist between and beside them, all operate from a fundamentally perennialist philosophical orientation. The curriculum is structured

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around the mastery of classical texts, primarily the Quran, the Hadith, the classical works of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam), and Arabic and Persian language and literature. The educational process is conceived as the transmission of a sacred inheritance. The teacher is not a facilitator of discovery but a custodian of tradition. The student is not primarily an autonomous learner but a recipient and inheritor.

This is not simply a matter of religious conservatism. It reflects a coherent and philosophically serious account of what education is for. If one believes, as the great Islamic educational philosophers from Al-Ghazali to Ibn Khaldun argued, that the fundamental purpose of human life is to know and worship God and to live in accordance with divine guidance, then the educational system that serves this purpose is one that transmits that guidance in all its richness, complexity, and depth. The Madrasa tradition, at its best, represents centuries of accumulated pedagogical sophistication in the service of this vision.

The problem, of course, is the confrontation with modernity. The perennialist tradition in Bangladesh's Madrasa system has been slow to engage with the epistemological challenges of modern science, the institutional demands of a modern economy, and the political demands of a modern democratic state. This slowness is not simple obscurantism. It reflects genuine and difficult questions about whether the modernization of education is simply an improvement or whether it represents a fundamental change in the nature and purpose of the educational enterprise, a change that the perennialist tradition has strong philosophical reasons to resist. We will return to this tension repeatedly throughout this textbook, because it is one of the most important and least resolved tensions in Bangladesh's educational landscape.

1.3 The Progressivist Tradition and Its Problems

The progressivist tradition in education is associated most powerfully with the American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859-1952). For Dewey, education is not the transmission of a fixed body of knowledge but the continuous reconstruction of experience. The child is not a vessel to be filled but an active learner whose experience, curiosity, and developing capacities must be the starting point of the educational process. Learning happens through doing. Knowledge is not an external object that the mind receives but a tool that the mind constructs in the course of solving real problems. The school is not a preparation for life but a form of life itself, a democratic community in which children learn the habits of thought, feeling, and action that democratic citizenship requires.

Dewey's influence on Bangladesh's education system has been significant but often poorly understood and incompletely implemented. The progressivist language of child-centeredness, activity-based learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving has been present in the official discourse of Bangladeshi education reform for decades. The 2023 curriculum reform, which we will examine in considerable detail, is the most ambitious attempt yet to implement progressivist principles across the entire school system. Premised on what its architects call a "social constructivist" theory of learning, drawing on Dewey but also on the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget and the social learning theory of Lev Vygotsky, the new curriculum attempts to move Bangladesh's schools away from rote memorization and toward what the National Curriculum Framework 2021 calls competency-based education.

The problems that have attended this reform are not incidental. They are philosophically revealing. Progressivism works, to the extent that it works, under specific social and material conditions. It requires teachers who are themselves deeply educated, philosophically informed, pedagogically sophisticated, and professionally autonomous. It requires schools that have space, resources, and materials for activity-based learning. It requires a social context in which parents trust the school to assess their children's development through means other than standardized tests. None of these conditions is robustly present in Bangladesh, and the result is that progressivist principles, transplanted into a context for which they were not designed without adequate preparation, have produced significant confusion and resistance. The philosophical critique is simple: a progressive pedagogy is not a technique that can be exported and installed like a software update. It is a practice that must grow from within a particular soil.

1.4 Essentialism and the State's Educational Vision

Essentialism in education is the philosophical position that education should transmit the essential knowledge, skills, and values that the social order requires. Unlike perennialism, which looks to a timeless canon, essentialism is more responsive to the changing needs of society and economy. It holds that there is an essential body of knowledge and skill that every citizen of a modern nation-state must possess, and that the school's primary responsibility is to ensure that every child acquires this body of knowledge and skill. Essentialism is the philosophical foundation of most state education systems in the modern world, including Bangladesh's general education system.

The essentialist vision in Bangladesh's education is most clearly visible in the structure of the national curriculum, in the emphasis on literacy and numeracy at the primary level, in the standardized public examinations that dominate the secondary and higher secondary levels, and in the persistent, if inadequately funded, commitment to universal primary education. The state has a story to tell about what it needs from its citizens, and the school is the principal institution through which that story is told. What is interesting and troubling is that the story has changed repeatedly and dramatically over the decades since independence, reflecting the changes in the political complexion of the government in power. Under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the essentialist vision emphasized Bengali nationalism, secularism, and the development of an educated citizenry capable of building a new and democratic nation. Under the successive military governments of Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Muhammad Ershad, Islam was increasingly incorporated into the essentialist educational vision, and the secular emphasis of the independence era was progressively diluted. Under Sheikh Hasina's governments, a version of essentialist nationalism that emphasized development, modernization, and Digital Bangladesh was the dominant frame. After the political revolution of August 2024, which we will examine in detail, the essentialist vision is being renegotiated once again.

The essentialist tradition in Bangladesh's education also has a specifically economic dimension that has become increasingly prominent since the late 1990s. Influenced by human capital theory, developed by economists Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, and propagated by international development organizations including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, the state's educational vision has increasingly framed education as an investment in human capital, a means of producing the skilled workers,

professionals, and knowledge workers that a growing economy requires. This framing has had significant consequences for the content of educational reform, for the distribution of resources across different levels and types of education, and for the criteria by which the success of the education system is measured. We will examine these consequences in considerable detail.

1.5 Critical Pedagogy and the Freireian Tradition

No philosophical survey of education in Bangladesh would be complete without an engagement with the tradition of critical pedagogy associated most powerfully with the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997). Freire's masterwork, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1968), is one of the most influential educational texts of the twentieth century, and its relevance to Bangladesh is immediate and profound.

Freire's central argument is that conventional education, what he called the "banking" model of education, is fundamentally oppressive. In the banking model, the teacher deposits knowledge into the passive student, as one might deposit money into a bank account. This model treats the student as an object rather than a subject, reproduces the existing social hierarchy by filling the poor and the marginalized with the knowledge and values of the powerful, and prevents the development of critical consciousness, the capacity to name, analyze, and transform the conditions of one's own oppression. Freire's alternative was a dialogical pedagogy in which teacher and student engage together in a process of "conscientization," a growing awareness of the social, political, and economic contradictions of the world, and a commitment to transforming it.

Freire's analysis maps with remarkable precision onto the condition of education in Bangladesh. The banking model, with its emphasis on rote memorization, its examination system that rewards the faithful reproduction of officially sanctioned knowledge, and its social function of reproducing existing hierarchies, dominates Bangladesh's school system at every level. The student who succeeds in this system is not necessarily one who has developed critical thinking or a capacity for creative problem-solving. Rather, the successful student is one who has mastered the art of reproducing what the teacher and the examination paper demand. This is a form of intellectual submission, and in a society characterized by deep inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity, and geographical location, the education system that demands intellectual submission serves the interests of those who benefit from those inequalities.

The critical pedagogical tradition has been influential in the work of certain Bangladeshi civil society organizations, most notably BRAC, which developed non-formal education programs from the 1970s onward that drew explicitly on progressive and critical pedagogical principles. BRAC's approach to non-formal education, which we will examine in detail, represents one of the most impressive and globally recognized attempts to implement Freirean principles in a context of mass poverty and educational marginalization.

1.6 Islamic Philosophy of Education and Its Contemporary Relevance

The Islamic philosophical tradition has produced a rich and sophisticated body of educational thought that remains deeply relevant to the condition of education in Bangladesh, where

approximately eighty-eight percent of the population is Muslim. The foundational Quranic injunction to "Read" (Iqra), the first word of divine revelation, establishes knowledge-seeking as a fundamental religious duty. The Prophet Muhammad's instruction that "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" articulates a universal educational imperative that pre-dates and, in many respects, anticipates the modern ideal of universal education.

The great classical Islamic philosophers of education, most notably Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126-1198), Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), and in the South Asian context, Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703-1762) and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898), developed sophisticated accounts of the relationship between religious and rational knowledge, the proper methods of education, the social function of the learned class, and the relationship between education and political authority. Al-Ghazali's critique of education that serves worldly ambition rather than spiritual development, Ibn Khaldun's social theory of education as the mechanism of civilizational reproduction, and Shah Waliullah's attempt to reconcile Islamic education with the demands of a changing world are not merely historical curiosities. They are active frameworks through which many Bangladeshi educators, clerics, parents, and students understand the purpose and proper form of education.

The contemporary relevance of this tradition is underscored by one of the most significant and unresolved tensions in Bangladeshi education: the relationship between the Islamic Madrasa system and the general education system. This tension is not simply a conflict between religion and secularism. It is a conflict between two coherent but incompatible philosophical accounts of what education is for. To understand this tension deeply, we need to understand not just the institutional history of the two systems but the philosophical traditions that animate them. We will do so in detail in subsequent chapters.

1.7 The Tagoreian Tradition and Its Forgotten Relevance

Among the philosophical traditions relevant to education in Bangladesh, none is more intimately connected to the cultural heritage of the region than the educational philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Tagore, who is universally venerated in Bangladesh as the author of its national anthem, was also one of the most original educational philosophers of the modern era.

Tagore's educational philosophy, developed most fully in the school he founded at Shantiniketan in 1901, was a profound critique of both Western colonial education and of narrowly traditionalist indigenous education. Against colonial education, which he regarded as producing "clerks" rather than full human beings, Tagore argued for an education rooted in the natural and cultural environment of Bengal, an education that engaged the whole person, body, mind, and spirit, through music, art, literature, nature study, and creative activity. Against narrow traditionalism, he argued for an education that was open to the best of all human traditions, Indian, European, and Asian, while remaining fundamentally grounded in the particular landscape, language, and culture of Bengal.

Tagore's critique of colonial education is worth quoting at length because it anticipates so much of what contemporary critics of Bangladesh's education system say. For Tagore, the problem with colonial education was not simply that it was alien. The deeper problem was that it was

mechanical. It treated education as the transmission of information rather than the cultivation of the whole human being. It separated knowledge from life, the classroom from the world, the student from her own experience and creativity. The result was what Tagore called "half-educated" human beings: people who possessed technical skills and book-knowledge but who were cut off from their own inner life and from the living culture of their community.

The Tagoreian tradition is "forgotten" in Bangladeshi educational discourse in the sense that it is reverenced but not seriously engaged. The national anthem is sung every morning in every school, but the educational philosophy of the man who wrote it is not taught in teacher training colleges or seriously incorporated into curriculum design. This is a significant loss, because the Tagoreian tradition offers resources for thinking about education in Bangladesh that are simultaneously rooted in the regional cultural heritage and oriented toward a genuinely humanistic conception of the educated person.

Chapter Two: The Architecture of History -- Education in Bengal from Ancient Times to Colonial Modernity

2.1 Before the British: Indigenous Education in Ancient Bengal

The land that is now Bangladesh has a history of educational culture stretching back more than two thousand years. To begin the story of Bangladesh's education system with the British colonial period, as is often done, is both historically inaccurate and philosophically damaging. It is inaccurate because it erases centuries of sophisticated educational practice. It is damaging because it reinforces the colonial narrative that meaningful education in the region began only with the arrival of Western civilization.

Before the British established their educational institutions in Bengal, the territory that is now Bangladesh had a rich and diverse educational landscape. In the pre-Islamic period, Buddhist educational institutions called Viharas, the most famous of which was the great Nalanda in nearby Bihar, provided advanced education in philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and the arts to students from across Asia. The Paharpur Vihara in present-day Rajshahi district, among the largest Buddhist complexes in South Asia and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was not merely a religious center but an educational institution of significant importance. The Brahmanic tradition maintained its own educational institutions, called Tols or Pathshalas, in which students received instruction in Sanskrit, the Vedic texts, philosophy, and the various branches of traditional knowledge.

When Islam came to Bengal, beginning in earnest with the Turkic conquests of the early thirteenth century, it brought with it a rich educational tradition centered on the Madrasa and the Maktab. The Maktab was the elementary institution in which children learned to read and write, primarily in Arabic and Persian, and received basic religious instruction. The Madrasa was the institution of higher learning, providing instruction in Islamic jurisprudence, theology, Arabic and Persian language and literature, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and other branches of knowledge. At its height, the Madrasa system of Bengal was part of a cosmopolitan Islamic

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educational world that connected Bengal to the great centers of learning in Cairo, Baghdad, Samarkand, and later Istanbul and Delhi.

William Adam's survey of indigenous education in Bengal, conducted between 1835 and 1838, famously found approximately one hundred thousand schools of various types in the combined territories of Bengal and Bihar before modern colonial education had significantly penetrated the region. While this figure has been disputed by subsequent historians, there is no serious doubt that pre-colonial Bengal had a functioning educational system of considerable scale and diversity, one that was rooted in the community, embedded in the local economy, and oriented toward the practical and spiritual needs of the population.

The characteristics of this indigenous educational system are philosophically significant and worth noting carefully. Education was not separated from life. The teacher, whether a Brahmin scholar, a Maulvi, or an artisan-teacher, was embedded in the community and taught subjects that were directly relevant to the lives that students would live. Education was not primarily credentialist. It was not oriented toward the acquisition of qualifications that would open doors to institutional power. It was oriented toward the cultivation of competence, whether spiritual competence in the case of religious education, practical competence in the case of vocational training, or intellectual competence in the case of advanced scholarly study. And crucially, education was not primarily the property of the state. It was a community practice, organized and maintained by local communities, religious establishments, and individual patrons.

All of this would change dramatically with the arrival of British colonial power.

2.2 The Colonial Intervention: Macaulay, Filtration, and the Making of a Colonized Mind

The British colonial intervention in education in Bengal is one of the most consequential and most debated episodes in the educational history of the region. Its effects are still visible in the structure, language, and philosophy of Bangladesh's education system today, more than two centuries after the intervention began and more than five decades after Bangladesh achieved independence.

The decisive moment in the colonial transformation of education in Bengal came in 1835, with Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous Minute on Indian Education. Macaulay, a member of the Governor-General's Supreme Council, argued that the British government should devote its limited educational resources to the promotion of Western-language education, primarily in English, rather than to the support of the existing systems of Arabic, Sanskrit, and Persian learning. His argument was explicitly colonial in its logic and contemptuous in its tone. He famously wrote that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.

Macaulay's Minute established the framework within which colonial education in Bengal would develop for the next century. Its central mechanism was what historians of education have called the "filtration theory": the idea that Western knowledge and values would "filter down" from a small class of English-educated Indians to the wider population. The British would educate a small elite of Indians in Western knowledge, and this elite would in turn educate the masses.

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This theory was explicitly designed to produce what Macaulay called a "class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect," a class that would serve as intermediaries between the colonial government and the governed population.

The educational system that emerged from this intervention had several defining characteristics that are relevant to understanding the current state of education in Bangladesh. First, it was profoundly stratified. The system was designed to produce an elite, not to educate a population. Second, it was linguistically alienating. The medium of instruction in the higher tiers of the system was English, a language that was foreign to the vast majority of the population and that served as a mechanism of social selection and exclusion. Third, it was oriented toward the production of a particular type of person: the clerk, the administrator, the professional who could serve the colonial bureaucracy and economy. It was not oriented toward the development of critical thinking, civic engagement, or independent inquiry. Fourth, it displaced and delegitimized existing indigenous educational traditions without providing an adequate substitute for the majority of the population.

The Wood's Dispatch of 1854, often called the "Magna Carta" of Indian education, established a more systematic framework for colonial education, creating a hierarchy of educational institutions from primary school to university, and establishing government departments of education in each province. The University of Calcutta, established in 1857, became the apex institution for the Bengal region, including the territory that is now Bangladesh, setting examinations and awarding degrees that structured the entire colonial educational hierarchy.

The Dhaka University, established in 1921, is a particularly important institution for the history of education in Bangladesh. Its establishment was partly a response to the partition of Bengal in 1905 and its reversal in 1911, and partly a response to demands from the Muslim intellectual and political leadership of eastern Bengal, who felt that the Muslim population was being systematically underserved by the Calcutta-centric educational system. The University of Dhaka would go on to play a central role in the linguistic and national consciousness of East Bengal, particularly in the Language Movement of 1952, to which we will turn shortly.

The colonial educational system also had a significant impact on the Madrasa tradition. Faced with the dominance of the new colonial educational system, the Muslim community of Bengal divided, broadly speaking, into two responses. One group, associated with the Deoband school founded in 1867, insisted on the preservation of traditional Islamic education as a form of cultural and religious resistance to colonial domination. The Quami Madrasa tradition that dominates Bangladesh today is descended from this Deobandi tradition. Another group, associated most prominently with Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and the Aligarh Muslim University he founded in 1875, argued that Muslims needed to engage with Western education in order to compete effectively in the new colonial order. The Aliya Madrasa system of Bangladesh, which incorporates both Islamic and secular subjects and awards degrees recognized by the state, represents a partial institutionalization of this latter tradition, as mediated through the colonial government's Madrasa reforms.

The psychological and cultural effects of colonial education on the population of Bengal are a subject of rich and important scholarship. The Martiniquais philosopher Frantz Fanon (1925-

1961), in his seminal work "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961), analyzed how colonial education functions to produce a colonized consciousness, a consciousness that internalizes the values, standards, and worldview of the colonizer and regards its own cultural heritage as inferior and backward. Albert Memmi's "The Colonizer and the Colonized" (1957) develops a similar analysis. In the Bengali context, Rabindranath Tagore's educational writing represents the most sophisticated indigenous critique of this colonizing effect of colonial education.

The postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, herself a Bengali, has argued that the effects of colonial education are not simply negative. Colonial education also provided opportunities, especially for women, that had not been available in the pre-colonial educational landscape. The history of the Bengali women's education movement, including the extraordinary work of figures such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), whose essay "Sultana's Dream" (1905) remains a landmark of feminist literature and educational imagination in the region, demonstrates that the opportunities provided by colonial education were real, even if they were structured by the priorities and limitations of the colonial system.

2.3 The Wood's Dispatch, Hunter Commission, and the Making of a System

The period between 1854 and 1920 saw the construction of a more or less coherent colonial educational system in Bengal, with layers of institutions from the primary vernacular school to the English-medium university, regulated by a bureaucratic apparatus of examinations, inspections, and grants-in-aid. The grants-in-aid system is particularly important for understanding the contemporary structure of Bangladesh's educational system, because it established the pattern, still powerfully operative today, of private educational institutions receiving public funding in exchange for conforming to state-determined standards.

The Hunter Commission of 1882 is an important landmark in this period. Established in response to criticisms that colonial education had neglected primary education in favor of elite secondary and higher education, the Hunter Commission recommended a greater emphasis on elementary education and a greater role for local and municipal bodies in its provision. The commission also made important recommendations about the education of women and the education of Muslims, acknowledging the deep inequalities that had developed within the colonial educational system.

The Curzon era (1899-1905) saw an ambitious program of educational reform that included the establishment of new agricultural schools, the restructuring of university curricula, and the attempt to systematize secondary education through the Calcutta University Act of 1904. The partition of Bengal in 1905, which divided the province into a Muslim-majority East Bengal and Assam and a Hindu-majority West Bengal, was partly motivated by the perception that the eastern, predominantly Muslim, portion of the province was educationally and economically disadvantaged and that a separate provincial administration would better serve its development. The partition was reversed in 1911, but its effects on Muslim political consciousness and educational aspiration in eastern Bengal were lasting.

2.4 The Language Movement and the Philosophy of Linguistic Identity

The Language Movement of 1952 is a founding event not only in the political history of Bangladesh but in the educational history of the region, because it established a principle that has been central to Bangladesh's educational philosophy ever since: the principle that the language of instruction in the school is not merely a technical matter of pedagogical efficiency but a matter of cultural identity, political dignity, and civilizational belonging.

When Pakistan was created in 1947 out of the partition of British India, the eastern wing, which contained the majority of the Pakistani population and spoke Bengali as its primary language, was placed in a political union with a western wing whose political and military elite spoke Urdu. The decision by the Pakistani government to impose Urdu as the sole national language of the new state was experienced by the people of East Pakistan as a profound act of cultural violence. Their language, Bengali, was not just a medium of communication. It was the bearer of one of the richest literary and cultural traditions in the world, a tradition that included Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate, and Kazi Nazrul Islam, the rebel poet. To deny the official status of Bengali was to deny the cultural existence and dignity of the majority population of Pakistan.

The student-led movement that resisted this imposition, culminating in the events of February 21, 1952, when police opened fire on student demonstrators at the University of Dhaka campus, killing several and wounding many, became the foundational event of Bangladeshi national consciousness. The date is now observed as International Mother Language Day by UNESCO, a global recognition of the principle for which the students died: that the right to be educated in one's mother language is a fundamental human right.

The educational implications of the Language Movement are profound and extend far beyond the question of which language is used in schools. The Language Movement established the principle that education must be in the service of the living culture of the people it educates, that the medium of instruction is not a neutral technical choice but a cultural and political one with profound implications for the formation of individual and collective identity. This principle has been, and continues to be, contested in Bangladesh's educational politics. The coexistence of Bengali-medium government schools, English-medium private schools, and Arabic-medium Madrasa institutions within the same national educational system reflects an ongoing and unresolved contest over the language and culture in which Bangladesh's educational system should be rooted.

2.5 The Pakistan Period: Educational Ideology and the East Bengal Experience

The period from 1947 to 1971 saw East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) subjected to a distinctive set of educational policies that were shaped by the broader ideological and political project of the Pakistani state. Understanding this period is essential for understanding the contradictions and tensions that characterize Bangladesh's educational system today.

The Pakistani state was built on the ideology of Islam as the foundation of nationhood. This ideology had direct educational implications. The "First Education Conference" held in Karachi in November and December 1947 set the tone for Pakistani educational policy. The conference recommended that Islamic ideology should permeate the educational system, that moral

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education based on Islamic principles should be provided at all levels, and that Islamic studies should be a compulsory subject. Arabic was to be taught at the secondary level, and religious education was to be integrated into the curriculum at all stages.

The Sharif Commission of 1959, appointed by the military government of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, produced the most comprehensive educational policy document of the Pakistani period. The Commission's report reflects the modernizing ambitions of the Ayub regime: it emphasized technical and vocational education, the expansion of higher education, and the reform of the examination system. It also reflected the ideological priorities of the Pakistani state: Islamic education was to be maintained and strengthened, and education was to serve the goal of national integration, which in practice meant the imposition of Urdu and the suppression of Bengali cultural distinctiveness.

The educational discrimination experienced by East Pakistan during this period is both well-documented and significant. Despite containing the majority of Pakistan's population, East Pakistan received a disproportionately small share of educational investment. The government of Pakistan consistently allocated a larger share of educational resources to West Pakistan. The educational establishment in Islamabad and in the universities of Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar was dominated by West Pakistani academics and administrators. The University of Dhaka and the other educational institutions of East Pakistan were under-resourced and politically suspect, regarded by the Pakistani state as potential breeding grounds for the Bengali nationalism that the state was committed to suppressing.

The intellectual and cultural ferment in the educational institutions of East Pakistan during this period produced the generation that would lead the liberation struggle of 1971. The students and faculty of the University of Dhaka, Rajshahi University, and the medical, engineering, and agricultural colleges were central to the development of a Bengali intellectual consciousness that was simultaneously secular, democratic, and nationalist, a consciousness that drew on the literary and cultural heritage of Bengal while insisting on the universal values of human dignity and self-determination.

The Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report (1974), prepared for the Pakistani government in the aftermath of the 1971 war, acknowledged that the educational policies of Pakistan had contributed to the alienation of the East Pakistani population. The report noted the systematic underfunding of education in East Pakistan, the exclusion of Bengalis from senior positions in the educational establishment, and the failure to develop an educational system that was responsive to the cultural and economic needs of the majority population.

2.6 Independence and the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission (1974)

The birth of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971, was accompanied by an urgent and immediate educational task: the construction of a national educational system that was rooted in Bengali culture, democratic in its philosophy, and capable of serving the developmental needs of one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the world.

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The government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, moved quickly to establish the foundations of a new educational order. The nationalization of primary schools by decree in 1973 was a landmark moment, bringing approximately thirty-six thousand primary schools under direct government control and responsibility. This was a massive undertaking that reflected both the democratic-socialist ideology of the Awami League government and the pragmatic recognition that private provision of primary education could not deliver universal access in a country with Bangladesh's level of poverty.

The four fundamental principles of the Bangladesh Constitution of 1972, known as the Char Moola Niti (the Four State Principles), were nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism. These four principles provided the philosophical framework within which the new government approached educational policy. Nationalism meant that education was to be conducted in the Bengali language and to celebrate and transmit the cultural heritage of Bengal. Socialism meant that education was to be universally accessible, free from the inequities of market provision, and oriented toward the collective good rather than individual advancement. Democracy meant that education was to cultivate the capacities of active citizenship. Secularism meant that the state educational system was to be neutral as between different religious traditions, providing general knowledge and moral education without privileging any particular religious community.

The Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission, established in 1972 and reporting in 1974, was the first comprehensive attempt to design an educational system for independent Bangladesh. Chaired by the distinguished scientist Dr. Muhammad Qudrat-e-Khuda, the Commission was asked to examine the existing educational system and make recommendations for its reorganization in accordance with the four state principles.

The Commission's report is a rich and philosophically serious document. It recommended a single national educational system, replacing the divided colonial inheritance of general education, Madrasa education, and English-medium private education, though this recommendation was never implemented. It recommended universal and compulsory primary education up to grade eight, a significantly higher level of compulsion than was internationally standard at the time. It recommended the Bengalization of the medium of instruction throughout the educational system, including at the university level, where English had continued to dominate in postgraduate education and research. It recommended a strong emphasis on science and technology education, reflecting the view of many in the independence generation that Bangladesh's development depended on the cultivation of scientific and technological capacity. And it recommended significant reforms to the university system, including the reorganization of the University Grants Commission and the expansion of research funding.

The tragedy is that the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission's recommendations were never implemented. The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 ended the government that had commissioned the report, and the succeeding military governments of Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Muhammad Ershad pursued very different educational policies.

2.7 Military Rule and the Transformation of Educational Ideology

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The period from 1975 to 1990, dominated by the military governments of Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990), saw a profound and consequential transformation in the philosophical foundations of Bangladesh's educational system.

The most significant change was the progressive Islamization of the state and its educational system. Ziaur Rahman amended the Constitution to replace secularism with the principle that "absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions." Ershad went further, declaring Islam the state religion in 1988. These constitutional changes had direct implications for the educational system. Islamic education was strengthened and made more prominent in the curriculum of general schools. The Madrasa system was expanded and given greater state support. The Islamization of the state encouraged a cultural shift in which Islamic identity became more central to the ways in which Bangladeshi people, including students and their families, understood their own educational aspirations.

The Mofizuddin Commission of 1976 and the Majid Khan Commission of 1983 reflected the educational priorities of the military governments. These reports moved away from the secular-nationalist framework of the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission and toward a framework that emphasized Islamic values, national unity, and the development of human resources for economic growth. The expansion of technical and vocational education, the introduction of Bangladesh Studies as a compulsory school subject, and the strengthening of Arabic and Islamic education at all levels were among the most visible educational policies of the military period.

The military period also saw significant changes in the governance of the educational system. The decentralization of some educational functions to the district and upazila level, the expansion of the grants-in-aid system to bring more private institutions under state oversight, and the establishment of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) as a major provider of non-formal education all date from this period. The BRAC schools, which we will examine in considerable detail, represent one of the most remarkable educational innovations of the late twentieth century, a genuinely indigenous solution to the problem of educational access that drew on international experience but was rooted in deep knowledge of the Bangladeshi social context.

2.8 Democratic Restoration and the Education Policy of 2010

The restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991, following mass protests that forced the resignation of General Ershad, inaugurated a new period in Bangladesh's educational history. The two major political parties that have dominated Bangladesh's democratic politics, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have had somewhat different educational philosophies, reflecting their different historical roots and ideological commitments. The Awami League has generally been more sympathetic to the secular-nationalist educational tradition and to the principles of the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission. The BNP has been more sympathetic to the role of Islamic education and to the Madrasa system.

The democratic period from 1991 onward saw a significant expansion of access to education at all levels. Primary school enrollment increased dramatically, reaching near-universal levels by the early 2000s. Secondary school enrollment expanded substantially, particularly for girls, in

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part due to the Female Secondary School Stipend Program, which provided financial support to girls who remained in school through the secondary level. This program is widely credited with having produced one of the most remarkable improvements in female educational participation seen anywhere in the world during this period.

The National Education Policy of 2010, developed under Sheikh Hasina's government by a committee chaired by the academic and public intellectual Professor Kabir Chowdhury, represented the most comprehensive educational policy statement since the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission report. The 2010 policy recommended an eight-year compulsory primary education cycle, the reform of the examination system, the modernization of the Madrasa curriculum, the expansion of technical and vocational education, the strengthening of pre-primary education, and the integration of information and communication technology into the educational system. The policy also reaffirmed the secular-nationalist principles of the 1972 Constitution, emphasizing the development of citizens who combined patriotism, scientific rationality, and humanistic values.

The implementation of the 2010 policy was partial and uneven. Some of its recommendations, such as the inclusion of pre-primary education in the public system and the expansion of ICT in schools, were implemented with varying degrees of success. Others, such as the restructuring of the Madrasa system and the reform of the examination system, made limited progress in the face of institutional inertia and political resistance.

Chapter Three: The Structural Architecture of Bangladesh's Education System

3.1 The Three-Stream System: A Structural Overview

The most fundamental structural characteristic of Bangladesh's educational system is its division into three parallel streams, each with its own institutional network, curriculum, examination system, language of instruction, and philosophical orientation. These three streams are: general education, Madrasa education, and English-medium education. Understanding the structure, content, and social function of each stream, and the relationships between them, is essential for any serious analysis of the system as a whole.

This three-stream structure is not the product of a deliberate design. It is the accumulated result of historical processes stretching back through the colonial period, the Pakistan period, and the independence era. Each stream reflects a different set of historical forces, ideological commitments, and social interests. Together, they constitute a system that is structurally fragmented, philosophically incoherent, and deeply unequal in the educational experiences and opportunities it provides to different children.

3.2 The General Education Stream

The general education stream is the mainstream of Bangladesh's educational system. It comprises the network of government primary schools (GPS), government secondary schools (GSS), non-

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government secondary schools (NGSS), and colleges, all following a curriculum designed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and examined by the relevant examining boards.

The structure of the general education stream is as follows. Pre-primary education covers one year for children aged five to six, though this is not yet fully integrated into the public primary school system. Primary education covers grades one through five, serving children aged six through eleven, and is in principle free and compulsory for all children. Junior secondary education covers grades six through eight, served by a combination of lower secondary schools and the upper sections of some primary schools. Secondary education covers grades nine and ten, culminating in the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination, one of the most important events in the life of a Bangladeshi student. Higher secondary education covers grades eleven and twelve, culminating in the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination, which serves as the gateway to university admission.

At the apex of the system are the universities, both public and private, regulated by the University Grants Commission. As of 2024, Bangladesh has 55 public universities and 117 approved private universities, a number that has grown dramatically since the Private University Act of 1992 opened the sector to private providers.

The governance of the general education stream is divided between two ministries, a division that is in itself a source of structural incoherence. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MPME) has responsibility for primary education, grades one through five. The Ministry of Education (MoE) has responsibility for secondary, higher secondary, and tertiary education. This division means that the transition from primary to secondary education, one of the most critical junctures in the educational life of any student, lacks unified governance, and that the two ministries have different priorities, different bureaucratic cultures, and different relationships with the financing and planning apparatus of the state.

The curriculum of the general education stream has been through multiple revisions since independence. The most important of these revisions in the contemporary period is the 2023 curriculum reform, which introduced a competency-based approach to teaching and learning. We will examine this reform in considerable detail in a subsequent section.

3.3 The Madrasa Education Stream

The Madrasa education stream comprises two distinct sub-systems that are frequently conflated but are in fact quite different in their philosophical orientation, governance structure, and social function. These are the Aliya Madrasa system and the Qawmi Madrasa system.

The Aliya Madrasa system is a government-recognized and partly government-funded system of religious education that operates under the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board. Established during the British colonial period as a means of providing an Islamic education that could coexist with the demands of the colonial government, the Aliya Madrasa system follows a curriculum that includes both Islamic subjects (Quran, Hadith, Fiqh, Arabic, Islamic history) and secular subjects (Bengali, English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies) similar to those of the general

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education stream. The degrees awarded by the Aliya Madrasa system, the Dakhil (equivalent to SSC), the Alim (equivalent to HSC), and the Fazil and Kamil (equivalent to bachelor's and master's degrees), are formally recognized by the government and carry equivalence with the corresponding degrees of the general education stream, at least in principle.

The Qawmi Madrasa system is a much larger, entirely privately funded system of Islamic education that operates outside the framework of government recognition and regulation. Descended from the Deobandi tradition, the Qawmi Madrasas follow the traditional Dars-e-Nizami curriculum, a curriculum of classical Islamic texts in jurisprudence, theology, logic, Arabic grammar, and Persian literature that was developed in the Mughal period and remains largely unchanged. The Qawmi system is characterized by its fierce independence from the state, its reliance on religious donations (zakaat, sadaqah) for financing, and its strong community embeddedness. Its students are often from the poorest rural communities, and its graduates typically enter careers as mosque imams, Islamic scholars, Madrasa teachers, or religious functionaries.

The Qawmi Madrasa system was formally given government recognition of its highest degree, the Dawra-e-Hadith, at the master's level, by Sheikh Hasina's government in 2018, in what many observers regarded as a calculated political move to secure the support of the Qawmi clerical establishment. The recognition raised important questions about the integration of the Qawmi system into the broader national educational framework, about the quality assurance mechanisms that should apply to it, and about the rights of its students to pursue higher education and employment on equal terms with graduates of the general and Aliya systems.

The social function of the Madrasa system in Bangladesh is complex and important to understand. For many poor families, particularly in rural areas, the Madrasa provides not only religious education but also food, accommodation, and a form of social insurance for children who cannot be supported at home. The boarding schools of the Qawmi system, in particular, absorb children from extremely poor families for whom the alternative is not secular school but no school at all. The Madrasa system is also an important mechanism of social reproduction for a specific class of religious professionals and for the religious economy that surrounds them.

The relationship between the Madrasa system and the general education system is one of the most politically charged issues in Bangladeshi educational politics. The secularizing tendency in Bangladeshi educational policy seeks to modernize the Madrasa curriculum, introduce secular subjects, and bring Madrasa education within the framework of state quality assurance. The religious establishment resists these efforts, regarding them as an attack on the autonomy and Islamic identity of the Madrasa system. The political parties have consistently used this tension for electoral advantage, with the Awami League nominally committed to Madrasa modernization while simultaneously making concessions to the Qawmi establishment, and the BNP more openly supportive of Madrasa autonomy while being careful not to alienate its secular nationalist base.

3.4 English-Medium Education: The Elite Track

The English-medium education system is the third stream of Bangladesh's educational architecture and, while it serves a relatively small percentage of the total student population, it exercises an influence on the overall system that is vastly disproportionate to its size. This is because English-medium education is the educational track of the Bangladeshi elite, the families of business leaders, senior government officials, lawyers, doctors, academics, and urban professionals who expect their children to attend university abroad or to access the upper reaches of the professional and corporate world in Bangladesh.

English-medium schools in Bangladesh follow one of several international curricula, most commonly the O-Level and A-Level system of Cambridge International Examinations, or one of the American international curricula. They are uniformly private, uniformly expensive, and uniformly oriented toward the production of students who can compete in the global educational marketplace. The fees at elite English-medium schools in Dhaka are comparable to private school fees in the United Kingdom or the United States, which means that access to these schools is effectively restricted to families in the top five to ten percent of the income distribution.

The existence of a parallel elite track within the educational system, operated in a foreign language, following a foreign curriculum, and oriented toward foreign universities, is philosophically significant and politically consequential. It means that the children of Bangladesh's elite are, in important respects, educated outside the national educational system. They do not sit the SSC or HSC examinations. They do not study the national curriculum. They are not socialized into the same educational culture as the vast majority of Bangladeshi students. The shared educational experience that democratic theory holds to be important for the formation of common citizenship is systematically absent for Bangladesh's most privileged class.

The class differentiation produced by the three-stream system is a fundamental structural problem of Bangladesh's education, one that no serious educational reform can afford to ignore. It means that the quality of the education a child receives is determined primarily not by her talents or effort but by her family's economic status and cultural capital. This is not merely an educational problem. It is a problem of social justice and democratic legitimacy.

3.5 Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET): The Neglected Stream

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) constitutes a fourth dimension of Bangladesh's educational architecture, one that has been consistently neglected relative to general education and that remains significantly below the scale and quality that Bangladesh's economic development requires.

The TVET system comprises a variety of institutions including polytechnic institutes, technical training centers, vocational training institutes, and industry-specific training programs. These institutions are governed by a complex web of agencies including the Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB), the Department of Technical Education (DTE) under the Ministry of Education, the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), and the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA), which was established in 2018 to provide strategic leadership and coordination across the TVET sector.

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The problem with Bangladesh's TVET system is not primarily its institutional architecture, complex as that is. The deeper problem is the social stigma that attaches to vocational and technical education in the Bangladeshi context, a stigma that is deeply rooted in the colonial educational legacy. The colonial educational system, as we have noted, was designed to produce clerks and professionals, not skilled workers. The resulting hierarchy of educational value, in which academic education is prestigious and vocational education is for those who have "failed" academically, persists with remarkable tenacity in contemporary Bangladesh, despite its manifest irrationality in a context where the country's most dynamic and growing economic sectors, the garment industry, construction, the informal service economy, and information technology, all require skilled workers rather than degree-holders.

The challenge of TVET reform is therefore not simply a technical matter of curriculum design and institution building. It is a philosophical and cultural challenge that requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between education and work, between the academic and the practical, between the prestige of the learned professions and the dignity of skilled labor.

Chapter Four: The Legal and Constitutional Framework of Education

4.1 Education as a Constitutional Right: Text, Interpretation, and Reality

The relationship between education and law in Bangladesh is one of the most interesting and underexplored dimensions of the country's educational system. The constitutional and legal framework within which education operates defines not only the structural arrangements of the system but also the normative claims that citizens can make upon it. Understanding this framework is essential for any serious analysis of Bangladesh's education, because it reveals the gap, often enormous, between the legal aspirations of the state and the lived reality of its citizens.

The Constitution of Bangladesh, adopted in 1972, does not establish education as a fundamental right in the same way that, for example, the Constitution of India as amended in 2002 does. Under the Indian Constitution, following the Eighty-Sixth Amendment, the right to free and compulsory education for children aged six to fourteen is a justiciable fundamental right. This means that any Indian citizen can go to court and demand that the state provide her child with free and compulsory education. The Bangladeshi Constitution is different. Article 17 of the Bangladesh Constitution states that the state shall adopt effective measures for "establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law." However, this provision is located in Part II of the Constitution, which deals with "Fundamental Principles of State Policy" rather than "Fundamental Rights." This is a legally significant distinction.

Fundamental Principles of State Policy in the Bangladeshi Constitutional tradition are not directly justiciable. They cannot be enforced by an individual in court in the way that fundamental rights can. They are directive principles, aspirations or goals toward which the state should strive, but their non-fulfillment does not give rise to an individual cause of action. This means that a Bangladeshi parent whose child is denied access to education cannot sue the state

on the basis of Article 17 alone. The state's obligation to provide universal education is moral and political rather than legally enforceable in the strict sense.

This distinction has had significant practical consequences. The limited legal enforceability of the right to education in Bangladesh has meant that the expansion of educational access has depended primarily on political will and development financing rather than on judicial enforcement. Where judicial activism has produced educational change in other countries, most famously in India's Right to Education Act (2009), inspired by the Unnikrishnan judgment of the Supreme Court, the Bangladeshi courts have played a less prominent role in driving educational reform.

This said, there have been important judicial interventions in Bangladeshi education. The High Court Division of the Supreme Court has from time to time intervened in matters relating to the management of educational institutions, the conduct of examinations, and the legal status of educational organizations. The constitutional writ jurisdiction has been used by students, teachers, and educational institutions to challenge administrative decisions that they regard as unlawful. And the concept of the right to education has been gaining ground in judicial interpretation, with some High Court decisions reading the right to education into the more general constitutional guarantees of life and liberty.

4.2 The Primary Education Act and Compulsory Education

The Primary Education (Compulsory) Act of 1990 is the principal legislative instrument establishing the legal obligation of compulsory education in Bangladesh. The Act makes primary education compulsory for all children in designated areas (the implementation has been area-by-area rather than nationwide), prohibits child labor that prevents children from attending school, and establishes the legal framework for the enforcement of compulsory education.

The implementation of the 1990 Act has been, to put it diplomatically, imperfect. The enforcement mechanisms are weak, and the penalties for non-compliance are nominal. The social and economic factors that prevent children from attending school, including poverty, child labor, the need for children to contribute to household work, early marriage for girls, and the distance from school in many rural areas, are not effectively addressed by a legal instrument that focuses primarily on the obligation of attendance rather than on the conditions that make attendance possible.

The right to education discourse has evolved significantly in Bangladesh in the context of the international Sustainable Development Goals framework. SDG4, the education goal, commits Bangladesh to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. The government has ratified this commitment, and it has shaped the direction of educational policy in important ways. However, the gap between the SDG4 commitments and the actual state of Bangladesh's education system, as we shall examine in detail, remains substantial.

4.3 The Legal Framework for Private Universities and Higher Education

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The legal framework for higher education in Bangladesh is one of the most important and most contested areas of educational law. The rapid expansion of private universities following the Private University Act of 1992 transformed the landscape of higher education in Bangladesh, creating a large private sector that has provided access to tertiary education for hundreds of thousands of students who could not gain admission to the limited places available in public universities. At the same time, it has created significant problems of quality assurance, governance, and accountability.

The Private University Act of 1992 established the basic framework for the regulation of private universities, and the Private University Act of 2010 replaced and significantly strengthened it. The 2010 Act requires private universities to have a permanent campus (rather than renting facilities), prohibits them from establishing satellite campuses in multiple cities, establishes a Board of Trustees as the governing body, and strengthens the role of the University Grants Commission in approving and monitoring private universities. The Act also requires private universities to allocate a certain percentage of their seats for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The implementation of the 2010 Act has been deeply problematic. Many private universities have continued to operate without permanent campuses, evading the legal requirement through a variety of administrative devices. The quality of education in many private universities is poor, with inadequate library resources, underqualified faculty, and examination systems that prioritize revenue generation over academic integrity. The UGC, which is supposed to provide quality assurance oversight, has been under-resourced and has often lacked the authority to impose meaningful sanctions on non-compliant institutions.

The legal status of the Qawmi Madrasa system raises particularly complex and interesting jurisprudential questions. The Qawmi Madrasas have historically operated in a kind of legal limbo, neither formally recognized by the state nor formally prohibited. They have been free to operate as they see fit, following their own curriculum, setting their own examinations, and awarding their own certificates, without being subject to the regulatory framework that applies to both general schools and Aliya Madrasas. The formal recognition of the Dawra-e-Hadith degree in 2018 changed this somewhat, but the Qawmi system remains largely outside the formal legal-regulatory framework of the national education system.

4.4 Teacher Rights, Employment Law, and the Politics of Teacher Registration

The legal status of teachers in Bangladesh's educational system is another area of significant complexity and political sensitivity. The conditions of employment of teachers in Bangladesh's different educational institutions vary enormously and reflect the fragmented structure of the system as a whole.

Teachers in government primary schools are civil servants. They are directly employed by the government, paid on government pay scales, entitled to government pension benefits, and subject to the rules and regulations of the civil service. Their professional status, while not high in social terms, is legally and economically secure relative to the average. The government primary teacher is, in principle, a permanent employee of the state.

Teachers in non-government secondary schools, which constitute the majority of secondary school institutions in Bangladesh, have a much more complex and insecure legal situation. Their salaries are paid partly by the government under the monthly payment order (MPO) system and partly by the school management committee. The MPO system covers only a portion of teachers in recognized non-government schools, and teachers who are not on the MPO often depend on irregular and inadequate payments from school management committees. The Non-Government Teachers and Employees Commission (NTEC) and various other bodies have attempted to rationalize this system, but the fundamental insecurity of the non-government teacher's legal and economic position remains a major structural problem.

The Bangladesh Teacher Registration and Certification Authority (NTRCA) was established in 2005 to introduce a system of teacher registration, requiring teachers in non-government schools to pass a national teacher registration examination before they can be appointed. The NTRCA system has been an important step toward professionalizing the teaching workforce, but it has been plagued by problems including corruption in the examination process, delays in processing registrations, and political interference in appointments.

The political dimension of teacher employment is one of the most important and least discussed aspects of Bangladesh's educational governance. Political parties, particularly at the local level, exert significant influence over teacher appointments in non-government schools, using the school management committee system to place party loyalists in teaching positions regardless of their qualifications. This politicization of teacher appointments is a major driver of the quality problem in Bangladeshi education.

4.5 Jurisprudential Analysis: Education, Equality, and the Constitutional Promise

The jurisprudential analysis of education in Bangladesh requires engagement with several intersecting normative frameworks: the constitutional framework of fundamental principles and rights, the international human rights framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (to which Bangladesh is a party), and the framework of Islamic jurisprudence, which remains deeply influential in the legal culture of the country.

The tension between these frameworks is most acute in the question of equality in education. The formal legal commitment to equal access to education sits in uneasy tension with the structural reality of a deeply unequal educational system in which the quality of education received by a child is determined primarily by his family's economic and social position. The three-stream structure of the system, with its drastically unequal provision for children from different class, religious, and geographical backgrounds, is a systematic violation of the constitutional principle of equality, even if it has not been challenged on those grounds with any consistency.

The gender dimension of educational equality has received more sustained legal and policy attention. The constitutional guarantee of equality between men and women, combined with the long-term effects of programs like the Female Secondary School Stipend, has produced significant improvements in female educational participation. Bangladesh is one of very few countries in the world where gender parity in secondary education has been achieved and in

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some measures exceeded, with girls now outnumbering boys in secondary school enrollment. This is a remarkable achievement that deserves careful analysis, not least because it does not translate straightforwardly into equality in the labor market or in the social and political life of the country.

The rights of children with disabilities in education is another area where the gap between legal commitment and practical reality is large. Bangladesh has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which includes provisions for inclusive education. The National Education Policy of 2010 articulates a commitment to inclusive education for children with disabilities. In practice, the vast majority of children with disabilities in Bangladesh have no access to education of any kind, whether in mainstream schools or in specialized institutions. The structural, attitudinal, and resource barriers to inclusion are enormous, and the legal frameworks that exist to challenge them are weak.

Chapter Five: The Political Economy of Education

5.1 Financing Education: The Budget and Its Discontents

No analysis of Bangladesh's education system can avoid the question of money. The financing of education, how much is spent, by whom, on what, and with what results, is the foundation on which everything else rests. Without adequate financing, the most sophisticated curriculum reform is a wish list, the most eloquent teacher training program is an aspiration, and the most ambitious educational policy document is, in the memorable phrase of one Bangladeshi educationist, "a promise on paper only."

The financial situation of Bangladesh's education system is, to put it plainly, a crisis. Bangladesh spends just 2% of GDP on education, among the lowest globally, compromising student learning outcomes. The Business Standard More precisely, as the data shows, the share of Bangladesh's total budget allocated to education has seen a significant decrease, dropping from 14% in the revised budget for FY2016 to around 10% in FY2024. Similarly, education spending as a percentage of GDP has declined from 1.79% in FY2016 to 1.48% in FY2024. The Business Standard

This level of investment is not simply inadequate in absolute terms. It represents a structural underinvestment that is historically anomalous for a country with Bangladesh's development aspirations. Among other Least Developed Countries, Bangladesh ranked as the third lowest in average education expenditure as a percentage of GDP between 2016 and 2023, with only Haiti and Somalia spending less. The Business Standard For a country that consistently presents itself as a development success story and that aspires to middle-income status by 2031 and a developed country by 2041, this level of educational investment is intellectually incoherent. A development model that aspires to move up the value chain from garment manufacturing to higher-skill manufacturing and services, while investing less than two percent of GDP in the education that would produce the skills this transition requires, contains a fundamental contradiction.

The fiscal year 2025-26 budget offers a critical opportunity to reflect on the government's priorities in this regard. This year's allocation to the education sector stands at Tk95,644 crore, marking a 27% increase from the revised Tk74,597 crore in FY 2024-25. In percentage terms, education now commands 12.1% of the total national budget and 2.1% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). ObserverBD

While the increase is encouraging, the underlying structural problems remain. Neighboring countries present more encouraging figures. Bhutan, for instance, invests over 8% of its GDP in education, while the Maldives allocates 4.58%. These comparative figures underscore the structural underinvestment in Bangladesh's education sector and highlight a critical policy gap. ObserverBD

A further dimension of the financing problem is the chronic failure to spend the money that is allocated. One of the most pressing issues facing the education budget is not merely how much is allocated, but how much is actually spent. Historically, 15-20% of the education budget remains unutilized each year. This recurring under-expenditure is often attributed to administrative inefficiencies, project delays, and inadequate capacity at local and institutional levels. ObserverBD

5.2 The Political Economy of Educational Investment

Why does Bangladesh invest so little in education? This is a question with several layers of answers, and addressing it requires an engagement with political economy, the analysis of the relationship between economic interests and political power.

At the most immediate level, Bangladesh's low educational investment reflects the priorities of a political class that has consistently prioritized infrastructure, energy, and economic growth projects that have higher political visibility and, in some cases, more generous opportunities for rent extraction than investment in education. Schools and teachers do not generate the kinds of economic and political returns that roads, bridges, power plants, and mega-infrastructure projects generate for political actors. Education investment tends to produce results on a time scale of decades, while political incentives operate on a time scale of electoral cycles.

There is also a structural explanation rooted in the fiscal architecture of the Bangladeshi state. Bangladesh has historically been one of the lowest tax-collecting countries in the world relative to its GDP, a reflection of the limited capacity and limited political will of the revenue authority, the political power of business and landowning classes who prefer not to pay taxes, and the massive scale of the informal economy that lies beyond the reach of the formal tax system. A state with limited revenue has limited capacity for public spending, and educational spending, which is primarily recurrent expenditure on teachers' salaries and school maintenance rather than the infrastructure spending that can be financed by debt, is particularly constrained by revenue limitations.

The role of development aid and loans in financing Bangladesh's education system adds another dimension of political economy. A significant portion of Bangladesh's educational investment has historically been financed by donors including the World Bank, the Asian Development

Bank, DFID (now FCDO), USAID, UNICEF, and others. This dependence on donor financing has given these organizations significant influence over the direction of educational policy, sometimes in ways that have not been fully aligned with Bangladesh's own developmental priorities and cultural values. The World Bank's emphasis on primary education and its promotion of particular approaches to curriculum and assessment, for example, has shaped Bangladesh's educational policy in ways that have not always been appropriate to the Bangladeshi context.

5.3 The Private Financing of Education: A Paradox of Poverty

One of the most striking paradoxes of education financing in Bangladesh is the very high level of private spending on education relative to public spending. Despite the formal provision of free primary education and subsidized secondary education, Bangladeshi families spend enormous amounts of their own money on private tutoring, coaching centers, notebooks and guidebooks, examination fees, and school costs that are not technically fees but function as such.

An Education Watch report showed a significant rise in education costs for Bangladeshi families, with out-of-pocket expenses increasing by 51% for secondary and 25% for primary education in the first half of last year alone. The Business Standard This is an extraordinary figure. It means that even "free" primary education is experienced by Bangladeshi families as a significant financial burden. The poorest families, for whom the out-of-pocket costs of education represent a significant proportion of household income, face real choices between educational investment and other immediate consumption needs. This is one of the structural drivers of both non-enrollment and dropout at all levels of the educational system.

The coaching center and private tutoring industry in Bangladesh is massive, pervasive, and deeply entrenched. It is estimated to be worth several thousand crore taka annually, though precise figures are difficult to obtain because much of the industry operates in the informal economy. The industry exists because the formal school system does not adequately prepare students for the high-stakes examinations that determine their educational and occupational futures. Teachers who are paid inadequate official salaries top up their incomes by providing private tuition to their own students, a practice that creates serious conflicts of interest and that effectively makes private tutoring a necessary supplement to formal schooling for any student who wants to succeed in the examination system.

The coaching industry is not only an economic phenomenon. It is a symptom of deeper systemic pathologies: inadequate teacher pay, poor quality classroom instruction, an examination system that rewards rote memorization over deep understanding, and a social competition for educational qualifications that is so intense, given the scarcity of formal employment in the upper tiers of the labor market, that families will make enormous sacrifices to give their children every possible competitive advantage.

5.4 Human Capital Theory and Its Limits in the Bangladeshi Context

The dominant theoretical framework through which international development organizations and increasingly the Bangladesh government itself analyzes education policy is human capital theory.

Human capital theory, as developed by Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker from the 1960s onward, conceptualizes education as an investment in the productive capacity of individual workers and, by extension, of the economy as a whole. Education increases the productivity of workers, which increases the wages they can command in the labor market, which increases the returns on the educational investment both for the individual and for society. The policy implication is that investment in education generates economic growth, and that under-investment in education represents both an economic irrationality and a missed opportunity for development.

Human capital theory has provided the intellectual foundation for the major international educational investment programs in Bangladesh, including the World Bank's sustained engagement with primary education, the Asian Development Bank's support for secondary education, and the various donor-funded programs aimed at expanding access to technical and vocational education. It has also shaped the language of Bangladesh's own educational policy documents, which consistently invoke the need to develop "human resources" as the driver of development.

The problems with human capital theory as an adequate framework for thinking about education in Bangladesh are multiple. First, the theory focuses on the supply side, on the education of workers, while neglecting the demand side, the availability of jobs that reward educational investment. Bangladesh's labor market is characterized by a significant mismatch between the supply of educated workers and the availability of jobs that require their skills. Large numbers of graduates from Bangladesh's universities are unable to find employment that matches their qualifications. This is not primarily an educational quality problem, though quality is certainly an issue. It is fundamentally a problem of the structure of the economy, which remains dominated by low-skill manufacturing and the informal sector, and which does not yet generate sufficient high-skill employment to absorb the graduates it educates.

Second, human capital theory provides an inadequate account of the non-economic dimensions of education. It struggles to incorporate the values of education for democratic citizenship, for cultural development, for personal fulfillment, and for social solidarity. In a context like Bangladesh, where education is deeply entangled with questions of linguistic identity, religious community, gender relations, and national belonging, a theory that reduces education to its economic productivity function misses much of what is most important about the educational enterprise.

Third, human capital theory's emphasis on the individual returns to education can, if uncritically applied, justify educational policies that widen inequality rather than reduce it. If education is primarily an individual investment, then it is rational for individuals with greater resources to invest more in education, producing higher-quality education for wealthy children and lower-quality education for poor children. This is, in fact, the logic that drives the development of the elite English-medium school sector in Bangladesh and the increasing stratification of educational quality across class lines.

5.5 Presidential and Political Analysis: Education as a Political Arena

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Education in Bangladesh is, in the most direct and explicit sense, a political arena. The content of school textbooks, the allocation of educational resources between regions and communities, the recognition or non-recognition of different educational credentials, the language of instruction, the relationship between the state and the Madrasa system, the composition and authority of the University Grants Commission, the politicization of university administration, and the conduct of student politics within university campuses are all intensely political issues that are contested by competing political actors with great energy and often with significant violence.

The most dramatic recent illustration of the political character of Bangladeshi education is the student-led uprising of 2024, which brought down the fifteen-year government of Sheikh Hasina. The immediate trigger was a student protest against the quota system in government employment, which reserved a significant proportion of civil service jobs for the descendants of freedom fighters of the 1971 liberation war. But the deeper causes were rooted in the education system: in the experience of millions of highly educated young Bangladeshis who found that their degrees did not translate into the employment and economic security they had been promised, in the resentment generated by a system of university governance in which political loyalty to the ruling party was more important than academic merit, and in the broader atmosphere of repression and intellectual conformity that had descended on Bangladesh's universities under a government that increasingly could not tolerate criticism.

The political upheaval of August 2024, following student-led protests that ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, prompted immediate NCTB actions to revise textbooks by excising "exaggerated" historical narratives linked to Hasina and her party, including portrayals in class 4-9 materials; this led to distribution delays for the 2024-2025 academic year, affecting over 43 million students. Grokipedia

This episode illuminates one of the most persistent and damaging characteristics of Bangladesh's educational politics: the use of the school curriculum as a vehicle for political propaganda. Under the Awami League government, the school textbooks produced by the NCTB were extensively criticized for presenting a version of Bangladeshi history that privileged the role of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League, downplayed the contributions of other political leaders and parties, and served the interests of the ruling party's political narrative rather than the educational interests of students. The 2023 textbooks under this framework faced widespread criticism for factual errors, such as nine identified inaccuracies across history, global studies, and other subjects, plagiarism in sections, and perceived ideological biases favoring the ruling Awami League, prompting NCTB-issued corrections and apologies from involved writers. Grokipedia

The use of educational institutions as sites of party political mobilization is another deeply embedded pathology of Bangladesh's educational system. Student wings of the major political parties, the Chhatra League (affiliated with the Awami League) and the Chhatra Dal (affiliated with the BNP), have long dominated university and college campuses, often through violence and intimidation. The culture of student politics in Bangladesh's public universities is characterized by extortion, physical violence, factional rivalry, and political interference in academic appointments, all of which have devastating effects on the quality and integrity of higher education.

Shortly after taking office, the Ministry of Education also released a 12-point agenda outlining priority reforms and signalling a concrete roadmap to drive improvements in quality, access and relevance across the sector. It closely aligns with commitments set out earlier in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party election manifesto, which positioned education as a strategic driver of national development. British Council

The manifesto commits to gradually increasing public spending on education to around five per cent of GDP, suggesting the sector's importance within the government's development agenda. At the school level, it proposes curriculum modernisation, expansion of technical and third-language learning, and improvements to infrastructure, digital access and school meals. British Council

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Chapter Six: The Pedagogical Traditions and Theories That Shape the Classroom

6.1 What Happens Inside the Classroom: The Practice of Teaching

The most important determinant of the quality of education any child receives is not the curriculum document, not the education policy statement, not the development project budget, not the inspection regime, and not the examination system. It is what happens inside the classroom between teacher and student. Pedagogy, the theory and practice of teaching and learning, is where educational ideals meet material reality, and it is where, in Bangladesh as everywhere, the most important battles over the quality of education are won or lost.

The dominant pedagogical practice in Bangladesh's schools, across all three streams and across all levels from primary to higher secondary, is what might be described as transmission pedagogy: a mode of teaching in which the teacher transmits knowledge and the student receives it, reproduces it in note form, commits it to memory, and reproduces it again in the examination hall. This is, in essence, the banking model that Paulo Freire critiqued. It is also, to be direct about it, a pedagogical tradition with a long history and a coherent rationale. When class sizes are large, when resources are limited, when teachers are inadequately trained, and when the examination system rewards recall over reasoning, transmission pedagogy is a rational response to structural constraints. The problem is not that transmission pedagogy is irrational. The problem is that it is educationally inadequate. It does not develop the critical thinking, creative problem-solving, collaborative capacity, or communicative skill that a twenty-first-century economy and a healthy democratic society require.

6.2 Behaviorism and Its Long Shadow

The theoretical foundation of transmission pedagogy in Bangladesh's educational tradition, insofar as it has any conscious theoretical foundation, is broadly behaviorist. Behaviorism in educational psychology, associated with figures such as B.F. Skinner, Edward Thorndike, and John Watson, holds that learning is essentially a matter of stimulus and response: the teacher presents stimuli (information, problems, questions) and the student responds (with answers, reproductions, behaviors), and the correct responses are reinforced while incorrect responses are

extinguished. Learning is visible, measurable, and behavioral. The curriculum specifies the behaviors that students are expected to display, and the examination measures whether they display them.

Behaviorism has had profound and largely unacknowledged influence on the design of Bangladesh's examination system, the structure of its curriculum frameworks, and the training of its teachers. The emphasis on measurable outcomes, on the specification of learning objectives in behavioral terms, and on the use of standardized tests to measure the achievement of those objectives reflects the behaviorist paradigm, even when those designing the system would not describe it in those terms.

The critique of behaviorism in educational psychology is now well-established. Constructivist theorists from Piaget and Vygotsky onward have argued that learning is not a passive process of behavioral conditioning but an active process of meaning-making, in which the learner constructs understanding by integrating new experience with existing knowledge. Cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that the kinds of understanding that are most durable and most transferable to new situations are precisely those that cannot be produced by drill and memorization but that require active engagement, inquiry, and reflection. These critiques have shaped the design of the 2023 curriculum reform in Bangladesh, which is explicitly premised on social constructivist theory.

6.3 Constructivism: Piaget, Vygotsky, and the New Curriculum

The 2023 curriculum reform represents the most ambitious attempt in Bangladeshi educational history to move from a behaviorist to a constructivist pedagogical paradigm. Understanding the constructivist theoretical framework that underpins the reform is essential for evaluating both its aspirations and its problems.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980), the Swiss developmental psychologist, is one of the most important theorists behind the constructivist movement in education. Piaget's central insight was that cognitive development proceeds through stages, each with its own characteristic mode of understanding and reasoning, and that genuine learning requires the active construction of understanding by the learner through processes of assimilation (fitting new experience into existing schemas) and accommodation (modifying existing schemas to accommodate new experience). For Piaget, the teacher's role is not to pour knowledge into the passive student but to provide the experiences and challenges that stimulate the learner's own cognitive development. The learner must be active, curious, and self-directed.

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), the Soviet psychologist, added a crucial social dimension to this constructivist account. For Vygotsky, learning is fundamentally a social process. The child develops cognitively through interaction with more knowledgeable others, initially parents and caregivers, then teachers and peers. Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), the zone between what a learner can do independently and what she can do with the assistance of a more skilled partner, is one of the most generative concepts in educational psychology. Teaching, from a Vygotskian perspective, is the art of working within the ZPD,

providing the scaffolding that supports the learner in developing capacities that she could not develop alone.

The 2023 curriculum reform draws on both Piagetian and Vygotskian constructivism. Its emphasis on activity-based learning, on group work and collaborative projects, on the development of competencies through experience rather than through drill, and on the teacher as a facilitator rather than a transmitter all reflect the constructivist paradigm. The change foreseen in pedagogy, premised on a social constructivist theory of learning and teaching characterised as "experiential learning," is expected to bring about a major change in student assessment. Presumably, it will be without numerical scores and grades; students' report cards would have geometric figures, triangles, squares and circles, denoting different descriptions of students' abilities and performance. The Daily Star

The philosophical ambition is admirable. The practical challenges are formidable.

6.4 The 2023 Curriculum Reform: An In-Depth Analysis

The introduction of the competency-based curriculum by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in 2023 is the most significant and most controversial educational reform in Bangladesh in a generation. It merits detailed analysis, because it illuminates with particular clarity the gap between educational philosophy and educational practice, and the specific challenges of educational reform in a resource-constrained, politically volatile, and institutionally weak context.

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) introduced a competency-based curriculum for classes one, six and seven in 2023 with a plan to incorporate all the classes up to 10 by 2025. The competency-based education is a shift from the traditional rote memorisation to an outcome-based approach to ensure proficiency in learning by students through demonstration of the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required for dealing with real-life situations at the age and grade-appropriate level. The Daily Star

The philosophical argument for the reform is compelling. The existing curriculum, characterized by enormous volumes of content to be memorized and reproduced in high-stakes examinations, has produced students who can pass examinations without developing genuine understanding or practical competence. The "creative question" format introduced in 2010, while an improvement on purely recall-based assessment, had been colonized by the coaching and guide-book industry, which produced template answers to predictable questions that students memorized rather than understood. The result was that the examination system continued to reward memorization even in its supposedly "creative" form.

The competency-based curriculum attempts to break this cycle by defining the educational enterprise in terms of competencies rather than content. Core features include the identification of 10 key competencies, such as effective communication, collaboration, critical thinking, digital literacy, and ethical reasoning, that integrate across subjects like mathematics, science, language, and social studies, rather than siloed disciplinary knowledge. Textbooks under this curriculum

reduce volume by approximately 30-40% compared to prior versions, prioritizing activity-based learning, project work, and skill demonstrations over traditional exams. Grokipedia

The assessment system associated with the new curriculum is perhaps its most radical and most controversial feature. According to the National Curriculum Framework 2021, students will be evaluated using a combination of the continuous assessments made by teachers during school weeks, and summative assessments that will take place twice a year. Instead of grades, teachers will use three shapes, triangles, circles, and squares, to track a student's expertise in competence. The Daily Star

This shift away from numerical grades and toward a competency-based descriptive assessment system represents a fundamental philosophical change in the conception of educational achievement. It reflects an aspiration to assess learning holistically, to capture dimensions of student development that numerical scores cannot capture, and to reduce the anxiety and distortion associated with high-stakes numerical grading. These are admirable goals, backed by substantial evidence from educational research.

The implementation, however, has been deeply problematic. One and a half years after it was launched, implementation of the new curriculum at schools is still in a shambles as the authorities are yet to finalise a method of evaluating the students. Due to a lack of training, many teachers are not sure how to deliver lectures and form student groups. The Daily Star More seriously, a NCTB survey on 2.53 lakh teachers in January found that 37.6 percent teachers "roughly" understood the assessment system while the rest understood it well. The teachers must use the app, Noipunno, to evaluate students. The Daily Star

The teacher preparation problem is the single most serious obstacle to the implementation of the new curriculum. The constructivist pedagogy that the curriculum demands requires teachers who are themselves deeply educated, who understand the theoretical foundations of the approach they are being asked to implement, who are confident enough in their own subject knowledge to facilitate open-ended inquiry rather than delivering pre-specified content, and who have the professional autonomy and institutional support to manage a classroom in a fundamentally different way from how they themselves were taught. The new curriculum, which aims to wean off students from rote memorisation, has not been piloted at the primary level due to delayed release of funds. Neither were the primary teachers given any training on how to implement the curriculum nor were they given a teacher guide. The Daily Star

This is a reform that was designed in the theoretical world of curriculum experts and launched into the practical world of schools without the sustained, deep, whole-system professional development that a change of this magnitude requires. The selection of trainers and their training to help roll out the major change in pedagogy has been done in haste. The time allowed for in-person training and orientation of classroom teachers was reduced from weeks to days, and even this could not be implemented for all teachers. The rollout of a major educational reform has all the hallmarks of how this should not be done. The Daily Star

There is also the question of the social and political context of the reform. The Islamist pressure on certain elements of the curriculum illustrates the political constraints within which

educational reform operates. In February last year, the NCTB recalled "History and Social Science: An Inquiry-based Reader" for 6th and 7th graders giving in to the pressure mainly from Islami Andolon Bangladesh who said the books were promoting the "debatable" Darwin's theory of evolution and demeaning the Islamic attire for women. The Daily Star

This capitulation to Islamist pressure is educationally catastrophic. The theory of evolution by natural selection is not "debatable" in any scientifically literate sense. It is one of the most extensively tested and most robustly confirmed theories in the history of science. To remove it from a school curriculum in response to religious pressure is to deprive students of access to fundamental scientific knowledge and to signal that the curriculum is subject to political and religious veto. This is not a small thing. It reflects a fundamental tension between the commitments of scientific education, to which the curriculum reform is explicitly devoted, and the political constraints imposed by a religious establishment that regards certain scientific findings as incompatible with Islamic belief.

6.5 The Problem of Teacher Quality: The Central Constraint

The quality of teachers is the most important determinant of the quality of education, and the most pervasive and serious problem in Bangladesh's education system at every level. This is not an opinion. It is one of the most consistent findings of educational research globally, and it is confirmed by every serious study of Bangladesh's educational system.

The problems with teacher quality in Bangladesh are multiple and mutually reinforcing. They begin with the selection of teachers. Teaching in Bangladesh's government primary schools is not among the most attractive career options for the most academically able graduates. The pay is inadequate, the working conditions are often poor, and the social status of the primary school teacher, while somewhat elevated in rural areas where the teacher may be among the few educated people in the community, is not high. The result is a teaching workforce at the primary level that includes many individuals who entered teaching because they could not secure more attractive employment, not because they were drawn to the profession by a deep commitment to children and learning.

The training that teachers receive is inadequate in both quantity and quality. The Primary Training Institutes (PTIs), which provide pre-service training for primary school teachers, offer a course of approximately 18 months duration that is, by most accounts, significantly below the level required to prepare teachers for the demands of contemporary primary education, let alone for the demands of the new competency-based curriculum. Secondary school teachers trained at the government Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) receive a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) qualification after one year of post-graduate study, which is, again, widely regarded as inadequate for the preparation of teachers who can deliver the kind of reflective, student-centered, inquiry-based teaching that modern educational theory requires.

The in-service professional development system is, if anything, in an even worse state. The cascade training model that Bangladesh has used for decades, in which a small number of "master trainers" at the national level train "district trainers," who in turn train school-level teachers, is a mechanism that reliably dilutes the quality and relevance of training at each step of

the cascade. By the time training reaches the classroom teacher at the end of the cascade, it bears little resemblance to what was intended at the national level.

The student-teacher ratio of 1:30 might seem manageable but for specialised subjects like science and maths, ratios are significantly lower, leading to large class sizes and reduced interaction in core subjects. "With such a paltry budget, you can only pay the teachers' salary. Unless the allocation is increased, the quality of education can not be improved," said Dr. Huq. The Business Standard

6.6 The Examination System: Assessment as Social Control

The examination system is the nervous system of Bangladesh's educational order. It determines what is taught, how it is taught, how students spend their time outside school, which students progress and which do not, which universities students can access, and ultimately what employment and social opportunities will be available to them. Understanding the examination system is therefore essential for understanding the educational system as a whole.

Bangladesh's secondary examination system is anchored by the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination, taken at the end of grade ten, and the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination, taken at the end of grade twelve. These examinations are administered by nine regional education boards plus the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board and the Bangladesh Technical Education Board. They are taken by millions of students simultaneously, coordinated by a national examination schedule, and assessed by hundreds of thousands of examiners.

The SSC and HSC examinations are genuinely high-stakes. A student's grade point average in these examinations determines her access to university, and therefore her access to the professional careers and social status that university education opens. In a society where formal employment in the high-wage sector is scarce, competition for the educational credentials that give access to that sector is intense, and the examination is the critical bottleneck. The intense competition for examination success is the fundamental driver of the coaching industry, of parental anxiety, of student stress, and of the pedagogical distortions produced by "teaching to the test."

The examination system also has serious integrity problems. The Public Examinations (Offences) Act and various other legal instruments attempt to prevent cheating in public examinations, but examination fraud at various levels has been a persistent and embarrassing problem. Leaked examination papers, impersonation of candidates, and the acceptance of bribes by examination officials have all been documented. The scale of the examination system, with its millions of candidates and hundreds of thousands of examiners, creates both the opportunity and the incentive for fraud that is genuinely difficult to suppress.

The new curriculum's attempt to move away from high-stakes written examinations toward continuous formative assessment and competency-based evaluation represents a genuine philosophical challenge to the existing examination regime. The resistance to this change from parents, from the coaching industry, and from many teachers themselves, reflects not simply conservatism but genuine concerns about the fairness and transparency of alternatives to

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standardized testing. If the new assessment system relies heavily on the subjective judgment of individual teachers, it creates opportunities for favoritism and inequality that the standardized examination, for all its faults, largely prevents.

Chapter Seven: Comparative Analysis -- Bangladesh in the Global Educational Landscape

7.1 The Comparative Method in Educational Analysis

Comparative education is the disciplined practice of understanding educational systems by placing them in relationship with other educational systems. It is a field with a long history and a rich theoretical tradition, from the pioneering work of Marc-Antoine Jullien de Paris in the early nineteenth century to the sophisticated comparative sociology of education developed by scholars such as Burton Clark, Margaret Archer, and Andy Green in the twentieth century. Comparative education is valuable not because other countries' educational systems offer simple models that can be imported and installed wholesale, but because comparison illuminates the taken-for-granted assumptions, path-dependent choices, and structural constraints of any particular system. To see Bangladesh's education through a comparative lens is to see it more clearly.

7.2 Bangladesh and South Asian Comparisons

The most immediate and most instructive comparative context for Bangladesh's education system is the South Asian region. Bangladesh shares historical, cultural, and institutional inheritances with India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, and comparison with these neighbors illuminates both the specificities of Bangladesh's educational situation and the common patterns of postcolonial educational development.

India provides the most important comparison, given the shared history of Bengal and the continuing cultural and intellectual exchange between Bangladesh and West Bengal. India's educational system has undergone significant transformation in the past two decades, most importantly through the Right to Education Act (RTE) of 2009, which established a justiciable right to free and compulsory education for all children aged six to fourteen, and which mandated specific standards for school infrastructure, teacher qualifications, and pupil-teacher ratios. The implementation of the RTE has been uneven and its results are contested, but it represents a significantly stronger legal commitment to the right to education than Bangladesh has made.

India's learning outcomes, as measured by international assessments and by the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) produced by the NGO Pratham, are also deeply problematic, revealing that large numbers of Indian children who are enrolled in school are not learning basic literacy and numeracy skills. The Indian experience demonstrates a lesson that is directly applicable to Bangladesh: expanding enrollment without improving learning quality does not deliver the educational outcomes that individuals and societies need.

The comparison with Sri Lanka is particularly instructive, because Sri Lanka has achieved educational outcomes that are significantly superior to those of Bangladesh despite having a per capita income that was not dramatically higher for most of its independent history. Sri Lanka's literacy rate, at over ninety-two percent, is among the highest in South Asia. Its learning outcomes, as measured by regional assessments, are consistently better than Bangladesh's. Sri Lanka invests a significantly higher share of its GDP and national budget in education than Bangladesh does. And crucially, Sri Lanka has maintained a more unified, better-governed, and better-funded public educational system, with less fragmentation between different streams and less proliferation of low-quality private providers.

The comparison with Pakistan is sobering for different reasons. Pakistan's educational system is characterized by many of the same structural problems as Bangladesh's: fragmentation between public and private, general and religious streams, chronic underfunding, poor teacher quality, and deep regional and gender inequalities. Bangladesh has generally performed better than Pakistan on educational indicators in recent decades, including gender parity in enrollment, but the comparison serves to illustrate the shared inheritance of colonial educational legacies in two countries that shared the same political system until 1971.

7.3 International Comparisons: The East Asian Development Model

The most influential international comparison in Bangladesh's educational discourse is with the high-performing East Asian educational systems, most notably South Korea, Singapore, Japan, and increasingly China and Vietnam. The remarkable economic development of these countries has been widely associated with their investment in education, and the quality of their educational systems has been repeatedly cited as a model for Bangladesh to emulate.

The comparison is instructive but must be handled with care. The East Asian educational systems have achieved high outcomes on international assessments such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and have produced graduates who have fueled the technological and industrial development of their countries. But the conditions that enabled these achievements are specific and not straightforwardly transferable.

South Korea and Singapore built their educational systems from a relatively low base in the post-independence period with a sustained commitment to educational investment that Bangladesh has never matched. South Korea's educational expenditure has consistently been among the highest in the world as a percentage of GDP. The teacher profession in both countries is highly selective, well-compensated, and socially respected, attracting high-achieving graduates who in Bangladesh would more likely choose medicine, engineering, or law.

The current reform initiatives in Singapore emphasise lifelong learning and the development of character. The government is also channelling resources into fostering innovation within educational settings. This includes the integration of advanced technology into teaching practices and the promotion of pedagogical strategies that are centred on students and inquiry-based learning. Vietnam is actively engaged in revamping its educational curriculum to align it with the

requirements of the 21st century. The emphasis is shifting away from rote memorisation and towards the cultivation of critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills. Additionally, there is a strong focus on enhancing teacher quality through professional development initiatives. The Business Standard

The PISA results also reveal a shadow side to the East Asian educational achievement: extraordinarily high levels of student anxiety, mental health problems, excessive competition, and in some countries, alarming rates of student suicide. The South Korean "education fever" (gyoyuk yeol), in which parents invest enormous financial and emotional resources in securing the best possible educational outcomes for their children, has produced both academic achievement and significant human suffering. This is not a model that Bangladesh should uncritically emulate.

7.4 The BRAC Model: A Bangladeshi Innovation for the World

No comparative analysis of Bangladesh's education system would be complete without a detailed examination of the BRAC non-formal education program, which is arguably Bangladesh's most significant and most globally recognized educational contribution.

BRAC (originally the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, now simply BRAC) was founded by Sir Fazle Hasan Abed in 1972 in the immediate aftermath of Bangladesh's independence, to assist the survivors of the liberation war. By the 1980s, BRAC had developed a comprehensive non-formal primary education program aimed at the children, particularly girls, who were not being served by the formal school system.

The BRAC school model is strikingly simple and strikingly effective. Classes are small (typically about thirty students), meeting for two to three hours daily in a community building (often a room in someone's house), taught by a woman from the local community who has received basic training from BRAC. The curriculum is aligned with the government primary curriculum but taught through BRAC's activity-based, child-centered pedagogy. The school schedule is flexible, accommodating the domestic responsibilities of girls who help with household work. Most importantly, BRAC schools are located in the community, accessible without long walks, and culturally familiar and non-threatening.

The pedagogical philosophy of BRAC's education program draws on multiple traditions: on the Freirean tradition of non-formal education and consciousness-raising, on the child-centered pedagogy of the progressive education tradition, and on an empirical knowledge of the conditions of learning in poor Bangladeshi communities that is deep, detailed, and hard-won. BRAC has operated its schools at scale, serving millions of children over several decades, and has accumulated one of the most impressive evidence bases in the world for the effectiveness of its educational model.

The BRAC experience offers several lessons for mainstream educational policy in Bangladesh. Small class sizes matter enormously for learning quality, and the current class sizes in government primary schools are too large. Teacher quality depends on careful selection, adequate compensation, and sustained support rather than on formal qualifications alone.

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Flexible school schedules can dramatically increase enrollment among children who have domestic or work responsibilities. Community involvement in the governance and maintenance of schools strengthens both quality and accountability. And activity-based, child-centered pedagogy can produce significantly better learning outcomes than transmission pedagogy, even in the most resource-constrained contexts.

7.5 Finland: The International Reference Point for Educational Excellence

Finland has become something of an international benchmark for high-quality, equitable, and humane education. Its success in international assessments, its striking teacher workforce quality, its deeply equitable educational system, and its approach to student wellbeing have made it an object of study and emulation for educational reformers around the world. Bangladesh's educational reformers have cited Finland among the international models that inspire the 2023 curriculum reform, particularly in relation to the shift away from high-stakes testing and toward formative assessment.

The Finnish model rests on several foundations that are relevant to Bangladesh's situation, even if not directly transferable. First, Finland invests heavily in teacher education, requiring a five-year master's degree program for all classroom teachers and making teacher education highly selective. Only a small fraction of applicants to teacher education programs are accepted, and the profession is socially respected and well-compensated. Second, Finland has developed an educational system that is highly equitable, with relatively small differences in quality between schools in different geographical areas and social contexts. Third, Finland has moved away from high-stakes standardized testing toward a system of teacher-led assessment and national sample assessments that provide system-level information without creating the destructive incentive structures of high-stakes examinations.

The limitations of the Finnish comparison for Bangladesh are also significant. Finland is a small, wealthy, relatively homogeneous society with a long history of investment in public institutions and social trust. Bangladesh is a large, poor, highly heterogeneous society with a short history of democratic governance and a political culture characterized by high levels of institutional mistrust. The conditions that make Finnish educational policy work, including the extraordinary quality of the teacher workforce, the strong social trust in public institutions, and the relative absence of deep socioeconomic inequality in educational outcomes, are precisely the conditions that Bangladesh lacks. This does not mean that nothing can be learned from Finland. It means that the learning must be thoughtful, selective, and grounded in a deep understanding of the specific context.

Chapter Eight: The Psychology of Learning in the Bangladeshi Classroom

8.1 Cognitive Psychology and the Reality of Bangladeshi Schools

Educational psychology provides the scientific foundation for understanding how students learn and how teaching can be made more effective. The translation of psychological research into

pedagogical practice is never straightforward, and the application of research conducted primarily in Western laboratory settings to the classroom realities of rural Bangladesh requires careful contextual intelligence. Nevertheless, several bodies of psychological research are directly relevant to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of Bangladesh's educational system and to thinking about how it might be improved.

Cognitive load theory, developed by John Sweller, is directly relevant to the diagnosis of Bangladesh's educational problems. Cognitive load theory argues that working memory, the mental workspace in which we process information actively, has limited capacity. When the demands placed on working memory exceed its capacity, learning is impeded. The traditional transmission pedagogy of Bangladesh's schools, with its large volumes of content, rapid pace of delivery, and emphasis on memorization of decontextualized information, imposes very high cognitive loads on students without providing the scaffolding, chunking, and practice that would enable students to build the long-term memory structures that allow for genuine understanding and retention.

Research on memory and learning by Ebbinghaus, Craik and Lockhart, and many subsequent investigators demonstrates that information is retained to the extent that it is processed deeply and meaningfully, connected to existing knowledge, rehearsed over time, and retrieved in varied contexts. Rote memorization of textbook content, the dominant mode of learning in Bangladesh's schools, scores poorly on virtually every dimension that memory research identifies as important for durable learning. Students who memorize answers for an examination and reproduce them in the examination hall typically forget most of what they "learned" within weeks of the examination.

The assessment research tradition represented by John Hattie's synthesis of meta-analyses on the effects of educational interventions on student achievement provides additional evidence-based guidance for Bangladesh's educational reform. Hattie's work identifies teacher feedback, formative assessment, and the explicit teaching of cognitive strategies as among the most powerful interventions that can improve student learning. The move toward formative assessment in the 2023 curriculum is consistent with this evidence base. The challenge, as we have noted, is implementation: providing effective formative feedback requires skills that most Bangladeshi teachers currently lack and that the professional development system has not adequately prepared them to develop.

8.2 Motivational Psychology and the Problem of Examination Anxiety

The motivational dimensions of learning in Bangladesh's educational system are important and underexamined. The intensity of examination competition in Bangladesh creates a learning environment characterized by high anxiety, performance orientation, and external motivation, all of which are associated by motivational psychologists with shallower learning, reduced intrinsic motivation, and poorer long-term retention.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (doing something because it is inherently interesting and enjoyable), identified regulation (doing something because it aligns with one's own values and

goals), and controlled motivation (doing something because of external pressure, reward, or threat). Research across many cultural contexts consistently shows that intrinsic and identified motivation are associated with deeper learning, better retention, and greater wellbeing, while controlled motivation is associated with surface learning, reduced creativity, and lower wellbeing.

The Bangladeshi educational environment, with its intense examination pressure, its coaching industry, and its parental expectations focused on examination grades, is structured to produce controlled motivation. Students study not because they find the material interesting but because they fear the consequences of examination failure. This is not a criticism of students or parents. It is a critique of a systemic structure that fails to cultivate the intrinsic motivation that produces the deepest and most durable learning.

Growth mindset theory, developed by Carol Dweck at Stanford, provides another relevant lens. Dweck's research distinguishes between a fixed mindset, the belief that intelligence and ability are fixed traits that one either has or does not have, and a growth mindset, the belief that intelligence and ability can be developed through effort and learning. Students with fixed mindsets tend to avoid challenges (because failure would reveal their inadequacy), give up in the face of difficulty, and interpret feedback as a judgment of their permanent worth. Students with growth mindsets tend to embrace challenges, persist in the face of difficulty, and interpret feedback as information about how to improve.

The binary, high-stakes examination system of Bangladesh's schools is structurally calibrated to produce fixed mindsets. When a student's entire educational and vocational future seems to hang on a single examination result, the stakes are too high for the risk-taking that learning requires. The failure of the examination is experienced not as a learning opportunity but as a definitive judgment of one's worth and potential. The 2023 curriculum's attempt to move toward formative, competency-based assessment is consistent with the insights of growth mindset theory. But as with so much of the reform, the theoretical aspiration and the practical implementation are very far apart.

8.3 Developmental Psychology and the Structure of the System

Developmental psychology, the study of how human capacities develop across the life course, provides important guidance for the design of educational systems. The work of Piaget, Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, and their successors has established a rich understanding of the developmental needs and capacities of children at different stages of life, and this understanding should inform the design of curricula, pedagogical practices, and assessment systems at each stage of the educational system.

Bangladesh's educational system has not been systematically designed in accordance with developmental principles. The heavy academic loading of the primary curriculum, with its emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic in the first years of school, is broadly consistent with developmental expectations, though the pedagogical approach is often too formal and teacher-directed for the developmental stage of young children. The transition from primary to secondary education is handled poorly in developmental terms: the shift from a single-teacher,

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holistic primary classroom to a multi-teacher, subject-differentiated secondary classroom, occurring at the age of eleven or twelve, is developmentally significant and requires careful bridging, which the system does not currently provide.

The developmental literature on adolescence is particularly relevant to the secondary school years. Adolescence is a period of rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development, during which young people develop abstract reasoning capacity, identity, and a capacity for moral judgment. The secondary school curriculum and pedagogical approach in Bangladesh does not adequately recognize the developmental characteristics of adolescence. The emphasis on content transmission and examination preparation does not engage the adolescent's developing capacity for abstract reasoning, critical thinking, and moral engagement. And the high-stakes examination pressure of the SSC and HSC years coincides with a developmental period when emotional wellbeing and a sense of agency and self-determination are particularly important.

8.4 Socio-cultural Psychology: Learning in Context

One of the most important insights of socio-cultural psychology, developed in the tradition of Vygotsky and elaborated by scholars such as Barbara Rogoff, Jerome Bruner, and Jean Lave, is that learning is fundamentally situated. That is, learning does not take place in an abstract, context-free space but in specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts that profoundly shape what is learned, how it is learned, and what learning means.

This insight has direct implications for understanding the educational experience of Bangladeshi students. The learning that takes place in a madrasa is not simply the same learning as that in a government school, conducted in a different institutional setting. It is a qualitatively different kind of learning, shaped by a different conception of knowledge, a different relationship between teacher and student, a different set of social practices and values, and a different vision of the human being that education is supposed to form. The same is true of the difference between urban and rural education, between elite English-medium education and working-class Bengali-medium education, between the education of girls and boys.

The socio-cultural perspective also draws attention to the role of family and community in learning. Research across many contexts shows that children's educational achievement is powerfully shaped by their family's educational background, social capital, and expectations. In Bangladesh, as in most societies, there is a strong correlation between family socioeconomic status and educational achievement. But the mechanisms of this correlation are complex and not simply reducible to material resources. They include the language environment of the home (children from more educated families encounter richer and more complex language from an early age), the reading materials and intellectual stimulation available in the home, the parents' own attitudes toward education and their capacity to support the child's learning, and the social networks that give access to information, coaching, and educational opportunities.

Understanding these socio-cultural mechanisms is essential for designing effective educational interventions in Bangladesh. Programs that focus only on the school and ignore the family and community context are likely to have limited impact. Programs that engage parents as partners in their children's education, that work to build the cultural and social capital of communities, and

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that acknowledge the diverse socio-cultural contexts in which learning takes place are more likely to be effective.

Chapter Nine: Gender, Education, and the Paradoxes of Progress

9.1 The Achievement of Gender Parity: A Remarkable Story

Bangladesh's achievement of gender parity in primary and secondary education enrollment is one of the most remarkable educational accomplishments of any low-income country in the past three decades. In 1990, girls were significantly underrepresented in Bangladesh's schools at every level, particularly at the secondary level. By the mid-2000s, girls had achieved parity with boys in primary and secondary enrollment, and by the 2010s, girls were actually outnumbering boys at the secondary level. This transformation is genuinely remarkable and deserves detailed analysis.

Several factors have contributed to this transformation. The Female Secondary School Stipend Program (FSSAP), introduced in 1994 and subsequently expanded, provided conditional cash transfers to families that kept their daughters in secondary school and that fulfilled certain attendance and examination requirements. The stipend program effectively subsidized the opportunity cost of girls' secondary education, which had previously been perceived by many families as too high (because girls could be contributing to household work or earning through domestic service). The program is widely credited with having dramatically increased girls' secondary enrollment and is frequently cited as a model of conditional cash transfer program design for other countries.

The expansion of microfinance through BRAC, the Grameen Bank, and many other organizations gave women greater economic agency within the household, and this economic empowerment appears to have translated into greater investment in daughters' education. The garment industry, which began its rapid expansion in the early 1980s and became the backbone of Bangladesh's export economy, created a massive demand for female labor and signaled to families that educating daughters was an economic investment with tangible returns.

The Women's movement in Bangladesh, rooted in the cultural and political ferment of the independence era and sustained by the work of organizations like the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and the Nari Pokkho, played an important role in shifting social norms around female education. The extraordinary political visibility of women in Bangladesh's public life, including the successive leadership of the country by women Prime Ministers, has contributed to a cultural environment in which female education is increasingly normalized and valued.

9.2 Beyond Parity: The Persistence of Gendered Educational Experience

The achievement of enrollment parity, important as it is, does not tell the whole story of gender and education in Bangladesh. Gender parity in enrollment has not produced parity in educational

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outcomes, in educational quality, or in the translation of education into economic and social power for women.

Girls' dropout rates at the secondary level remain higher than boys', driven by early marriage, which remains common in Bangladesh despite legal prohibitions. The Bangladeshi government has set the legal minimum age of marriage at eighteen for women and twenty-one for men, but the enforcement of this law is weak, and child marriage, particularly in rural areas and among poor families, continues to remove girls from school before they can complete their secondary education. The patriarchal family structure and the cultural norm of purdah (female seclusion) continue to restrict the geographical mobility of girls and women, limiting their access to educational institutions, particularly at the higher secondary and tertiary levels, that are not within walking distance of their homes.

In higher education, gender disparity is stark. Women are significantly underrepresented in public universities, in science and engineering programs, in postgraduate education, and in the ranks of academic staff. The glass ceiling that prevents women from advancing in the educational and professional hierarchy is not primarily a legal barrier (the laws formally prohibit gender discrimination) but a social and cultural one, rooted in deeply embedded gender norms that assign domestic and reproductive roles to women and reserve the public sphere of economic, political, and intellectual life for men.

The quality of education that girls receive, particularly in rural areas, is also not equal to the quality of education received by their male peers. The curriculum of the general school system has historically presented gender stereotyped portrayals of men and women, reinforcing the idea that women's primary roles are domestic while men's roles are public. The new NCTB curriculum of 2023 has made some efforts to address gender stereotyping in textbook content, though with mixed results and with the countervailing pressure of conservative religious groups that insist on traditional gender roles.

9.3 STEM Education and Gender: A Global Problem with Local Dimensions

The underrepresentation of girls and women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education is a global phenomenon with specific local dimensions in Bangladesh. Across the world, the gap in STEM participation between male and female students has multiple causes: societal stereotypes that associate mathematical and scientific ability with masculinity, educational practices that discourage girls from pursuing these subjects, a lack of female role models in STEM careers, and the interaction of these factors with the specific cultural context of each society.

In Bangladesh, the STEM gender gap is acute. Girls are significantly less likely than boys to choose science at the secondary school level, and significantly less likely to pursue engineering, technology, or the natural sciences at the university level. This under-participation has significant economic consequences: it reduces the supply of skilled female workers in Bangladesh's fastest-growing economic sectors and perpetuates the gender wage gap in the formal labor market.

The causes of the STEM gender gap in Bangladesh reflect both universal factors and specifically Bangladeshi ones. Universal factors include teacher expectations and gender stereotyping in the classroom. Specifically Bangladeshi factors include the practical constraints imposed on girls' mobility (making it harder to attend specialized STEM schools or coaching centers), the cultural association of science with professional careers in medicine and engineering that are more accessible to boys through the social networks of male professional communities, and the influence of conservative religious norms that in some communities discourage girls' participation in public life, including the public life of higher education and professional work.

Chapter Ten: Problems, Crises, and the Anatomy of Systemic Failure

10.1 The Learning Crisis: What Students Are Not Learning

The most fundamental problem of Bangladesh's education system is the learning crisis: the systematic failure of the system to ensure that students who attend school actually learn what the curriculum intends them to learn. This learning crisis is well-documented and deeply troubling.

Research conducted by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) revealed that 84% of students can identify the Bangla alphabet, only 56% can fluently read a Bangla paragraph and 43% can read a Bangla story. In mathematics, 90% can identify single digits, yet only 29% can perform subtraction with borrowing and just 8% can divide a 3-digit by 1-digit problem, indicating limited advanced numeracy skills. English proficiency is notably low, with 43% of children lacking basic English literacy; only 57% can recognise English alphabets, and just 11% of private school students, 4% of public school students, and 1% of madrasa students can interpret simple English sentences. These findings echo those from the 2017 assessment. The Business Standard

These figures are shocking. A child who has spent five years in primary school and cannot fluently read a paragraph in her native language or perform basic arithmetic has not been educated. She has been enrolled. She has been present. She has been counted in the enrollment statistics that Bangladesh presents to the international community as evidence of its educational progress. But she has not learned what a primary education should ensure she learns. The gap between enrollment and learning is the central crisis of Bangladesh's education system.

No Bangladeshi university is in the top 800 spots of the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings for 2025, whereas India has secured 22nd spot and Pakistan the ninth. The Business Standard This reflects the systemic quality problem that extends from primary education all the way through the educational hierarchy. Poor learning at the primary level produces poorly prepared secondary students. Poorly prepared secondary students produce poorly prepared university entrants. And poorly prepared university entrants produce poorly educated graduates who are ill-equipped for the demands of a modern economy and a democratic society.

10.2 The Equity Crisis: Who Gets What Education

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The equity dimensions of Bangladesh's educational crisis are multiple and intersecting. They operate along lines of class, gender, geography, religion, and physical ability. Taken together, they mean that the life chances of a Bangladeshi child are profoundly shaped by factors entirely outside that child's control, and that the education system, rather than providing a ladder out of disadvantage, often reinforces and reproduces existing inequalities.

Class inequality is the most fundamental. The three-stream structure of the system means that a child born to an elite family in Dhaka will receive a fundamentally different, and fundamentally better, education than a child born to a poor family in a remote char or a hill district. The elite child will attend an English-medium school with small classes, well-qualified teachers, good libraries, and modern facilities, following an internationally recognized curriculum that will prepare her for university education in the UK, the US, or Australia. The poor child will attend a government primary school with overcrowded classrooms, undertrained teachers, inadequate facilities, and a curriculum that, however well-designed in principle, is inadequately resourced for effective implementation.

Geographical inequality compounds class inequality. The quality of education available in Dhaka is consistently higher than the quality available in secondary cities, which is higher than the quality available in rural areas, which is higher than the quality available in the most remote and underserved areas. The char areas (islands in the river systems), the hill tracts (where indigenous communities live), and the most remote rural areas have the least access to quality education and the highest rates of out-of-school children.

10.3 Corruption, Governance Failure, and Institutional Decay

Corruption is a systemic problem in Bangladesh's educational system that operates at multiple levels and through multiple mechanisms. At the macro level, corruption in the allocation of educational contracts and the procurement of textbooks and educational materials represents a diversion of resources from educational purposes to private pockets. The NCTB textbook procurement and printing process has historically been a significant site of corruption, with overpricing, inferior quality, and delayed delivery all attributable in part to corrupt practices in the procurement system.

At the institutional level, corruption in the management of educational institutions includes the misappropriation of school funds by school management committee members, the solicitation of bribes for enrollment, appointment, and promotion decisions, and the manipulation of examination results. The appointment of unqualified teachers through political influence and bribery is a systemic problem that has directly damaging effects on educational quality.

At the classroom level, the widespread practice of private tutoring by teachers to their own students represents a conflict of interest that borders on corruption: teachers who deliver poor quality instruction in the classroom because they know their students will come to them for private tuition are exploiting their position for personal financial gain at the expense of students who cannot afford private tuition.

10.4 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Educational Legacy

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The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2022 had a devastating impact on Bangladesh's education system, one whose effects will be felt for a generation. Bangladesh's schools were closed for an extended period, from March 2020 to September 2021, making it one of the longest school closures in the world. During this period, attempts to shift to remote learning exposed the deep inequalities of Bangladesh's educational system: only a small minority of students, primarily from urban middle-class and elite families, had access to the devices, connectivity, and home environments necessary for effective remote learning. The vast majority of students, particularly those from poor rural families, had no meaningful access to education during the closure period.

The learning losses produced by this prolonged school closure are substantial and are likely to compound the existing learning crisis significantly. Studies from other contexts suggest that students who miss extended periods of schooling experience lasting deficits in learning achievement that are not easily or quickly remedied by a return to normal schooling. For Bangladesh, where the learning crisis was already severe before the pandemic, the additional learning losses of the pandemic period represent a major educational emergency that required urgent and sustained remediation. The 2023 curriculum reform was launched before the pandemic learning losses had been systematically assessed and addressed, which is one of the most serious criticisms that can be made of its timing and design.

10.5 Student Politics and the Crisis of Higher Education

The crisis of higher education in Bangladesh is one of the most serious and most politically sensitive dimensions of the educational system's problems. Bangladesh's public universities are in a state of institutional decay that is well-documented and deeply alarming.

The politicization of university governance has been discussed above. Its effects include the appointment of vice-chancellors and other senior academic administrators on the basis of political loyalty rather than academic merit, the occupation of student dormitories by political party activists who use them as bases for political mobilization and, in many cases, criminal activity, the intimidation of dissenting voices among academic staff and students, and the corruption of the admission and examination processes through political interference.

The physical infrastructure of many public universities is seriously inadequate. Libraries lack current books and journals. Laboratories lack equipment. Classrooms are overcrowded. Faculty are underpaid relative to their qualifications, creating incentives for them to supplement their incomes through private tutoring, private practice (in the case of medical and legal faculty), and consultancy, at the expense of their teaching and research responsibilities.

The research output of Bangladesh's universities is minimal by international standards. The number of internationally published research papers per faculty member is among the lowest in Asia. This reflects inadequate research funding, inadequate library and laboratory infrastructure, inadequate time for research given the teaching loads of faculty, and a culture in which research is not highly valued or rewarded.

The private university sector, which has expanded massively since 1992, has addressed some of the access problems of higher education by creating many more places, but at the cost of a

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significant reduction in average quality. Many private universities in Bangladesh operate primarily as credential-issuing operations rather than as genuine institutions of higher learning. The absence of robust quality assurance, the proliferation of programs without adequate faculty or resources, and the perverse incentives created by a tuition-fee business model that prioritizes student retention over academic standards have produced a private university sector that, with honorable exceptions, provides poor value for the considerable money that students and families pay for its credentials.

Chapter Eleven: Recent Developments, The Post-2024 Landscape, and The Road Forward

11.1 The Revolution of August 2024 and Its Educational Implications

The student-led uprising of July and August 2024, which culminated in the resignation and departure of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the installation of an interim government led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, represents a watershed moment in Bangladesh's political and educational history. The uprising was the most dramatic political event in Bangladesh since the transition from military to civilian rule in 1991, and its educational implications are profound.

The immediate trigger of the uprising, as noted earlier, was a student protest against the government employment quota system. But the deeper causes were rooted in the educational experience of a generation of young Bangladeshis who found that the educational credentials for which they and their families had sacrificed so much were not translating into the economic security and social recognition they had been promised. The graduate unemployment problem, the politicization of university governance, the suppression of dissent on campuses, and the general atmosphere of repression and institutional dysfunction in Bangladesh's higher education system all contributed to the conditions that produced the explosion of 2024.

The interim government that came to power in August 2024, and the BNP-led government that followed it, have each presented education as a central priority. The BNP manifesto's commitments on education, discussed earlier, represent a significant political commitment to educational reform. In higher education, the manifesto outlines a number of measures aimed at strengthening research, governance and international engagement across universities, alongside efforts to expand access to tertiary education. A notable commitment is the provision of free education for women up to postgraduate level and for men up to undergraduate level, reflecting a broader focus on improving participation and equity. British Council

Whether these commitments will be translated into reality depends on political will, administrative capacity, and the availability of resources. The post-2024 political landscape also creates new questions about the direction of educational policy. The removal of Sheikh Hasina's government was accompanied by a strong reaction against the curricular and pedagogical direction of the Awami League period, including the 2023 curriculum reform, which had been associated in the public mind with that government. The fate of the curriculum reform under the new political dispensation remains uncertain as of 2026, with ongoing debate about whether to continue, modify, or abandon it.

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11.2 The 2025-2026 Budget and the Question of Investment

Education remains the most powerful tool for individual empowerment and societal transformation. In a country like Bangladesh, where more than a third of the population is under 25, investment in education is not just a moral imperative, it is a strategic necessity. The fiscal year 2025-26 budget offers a critical opportunity to reflect on the government's priorities in this regard. ObserverBD

Fourth, reforms must be undertaken to address disparities across the three major educational streams. This includes developing a unified national curriculum, improving equivalence across streams, and ensuring all students are equipped with critical thinking and job-relevant skills. Finally, a renewed emphasis must be placed on the quality of education. Merely increasing enrollment rates is no longer sufficient. The focus must now shift to improving learning outcomes. This means investments in teacher training, digital learning tools, updated textbooks, student assessment reforms, and safe learning environments. Moreover, the integration of life skills, climate education, and gender-sensitive approaches should be central to curriculum development. ObserverBD

11.3 Digital Education and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

The question of digital education occupies an increasingly central place in Bangladesh's educational discourse, framed within the ambitious national vision articulated first as "Digital Bangladesh" and subsequently as "Smart Bangladesh." The aspiration to build a knowledge economy and to equip students with the digital literacy required for participation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution has driven investments in ICT infrastructure in schools, the development of digital educational content, and the integration of digital tools into the classroom.

The reality of digital education in Bangladesh is, predictably, uneven. In urban areas, and particularly in elite English-medium schools, digital technology is well-integrated into the learning environment, with students using tablets and laptops, accessing online learning platforms, and developing genuine digital competency. In rural government schools, which serve the vast majority of Bangladesh's students, the infrastructure is inadequate, the internet connectivity is unreliable, and the teachers are often themselves digitally illiterate. The digital divide in Bangladesh's education system is, in other words, another dimension of the class divide that pervades the entire system.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this digital divide with particular brutality, as remote learning proved impossible for most students. But it also created new impetus for the development of digital educational content and platforms. Organizations including BRAC, the a2i (Access to Information) program of the government, and various international development organizations have invested in the development of digital content and online learning platforms that, in principle, could extend the reach of quality education to students in remote areas. The practical barriers to realizing this potential, including device costs, connectivity costs, electricity supply, and the low digital literacy of both teachers and students in rural areas, remain substantial.

11.4 Climate Education and Environmental Challenges

Bangladesh is one of the countries in the world most severely affected by climate change. Its low-lying geography, its dense population, its dependence on agriculture, and its vulnerability to flooding, cyclones, and sea-level rise make climate change not an abstract global problem but an immediate and existential threat to the lives and livelihoods of millions of Bangladeshis. The education system has a critical role to play in preparing the next generation for the challenges of a climate-changed world.

Climate education in Bangladesh's schools is currently inadequate to this challenge. While climate-related content appears in science and social studies curricula, it is not integrated into a coherent, cross-disciplinary framework that develops the knowledge, skills, and values that climate adaptation and mitigation require. The 2023 curriculum reform identified environmental literacy as one of its competency areas, but the specific content and pedagogical approach for climate education are not yet fully developed.

The philosophical dimensions of climate education in Bangladesh are interesting and complex. How should a school system teach children about climate change in a context where many of the causes of climate change are produced by the wealthy countries of the global north, while many of the worst effects are experienced by the poor countries of the global south? How does one teach environmental ethics in a society where the immediate pressures of poverty and economic development push relentlessly toward the exploitation of natural resources? How does one cultivate a sense of ecological responsibility in a context where the survival of families depends on agriculture, fishing, and the extraction of natural resources from environments that are already under severe stress?

These are genuine and difficult pedagogical and philosophical questions that Bangladesh's education system has not yet adequately engaged.

Conclusion to Part One: The Weight of the Inheritance and the Challenge of Transformation

The education system of Bangladesh is the product of more than a millennium of educational history, from the Buddhist Viharas and the early Islamic Madrasas to the colonial university and the post-independence government school. It is the product of the aspirations of independence, the compromises of military rule, the democratic contests of the 1990s and 2000s, the modernizing ambitions of Sheikh Hasina's Digital Bangladesh, and the revolutionary anger of the 2024 student uprising. It is a system shaped by the competing claims of secular nationalism and Islamic identity, of development aspiration and resource scarcity, of international best practice and local cultural reality.

To understand this system is not simply to catalogue its problems, of which there are many and serious. It is to understand the forces that produced it, the philosophical traditions that animate its different parts, the political economy that sustains its structural failures, and the genuine educational innovations, from BRAC to the 2023 curriculum experiment, that represent efforts to transcend those failures.

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Part One has sought to lay the philosophical, historical, structural, legal, economic, pedagogical, psychological, and comparative foundations for the deeper analysis that will follow in the remaining nine parts of this work. We have established that Bangladesh's education system is not simply underfunded or poorly managed. It is philosophically incoherent, structured around a colonial inheritance that was never adequately transformed, divided among three streams with incompatible epistemological foundations, governed by a political culture that consistently subordinates educational integrity to partisan interest, and financed at a level that makes sustained improvement of quality virtually impossible.

We have also established that Bangladesh is not without educational resources or educational vision. The BRAC model is a world-class innovation. The gender parity achievement is remarkable. The 2023 curriculum reform, for all its implementation failures, represents a genuine attempt to move beyond the rote memorization and examination-driven pedagogy that has so limited the educational development of Bangladesh's children. The political ambitions of the post-2024 government, if they can be translated into sustained policy and adequate investment, offer the possibility of genuine transformation.

The remaining nine parts of this work will deepen this analysis in specific dimensions: Part Two will focus on the sociology and anthropology of education in Bangladesh; Part Three will examine the political history of education in detail; Part Four will analyze the curriculum and assessment system; Part Five will focus on teacher education and teacher quality; Part Six will examine higher education and university governance; Part Seven will analyze technical and vocational education; Part Eight will examine non-formal education and the BRAC model; Part Nine will provide a detailed comparative analysis; and Part Ten will offer a synthesis and a set of evidence-based recommendations for the transformation of Bangladesh's education system.

The task ahead is large. The inheritance is heavy. But the children of Bangladesh deserve nothing less than the full weight of our analytical attention and our normative commitment to their right to an education that is genuinely worthy of the name.

PART TWO: THE SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

Class, Community, Culture, and the Social Architecture of Learning

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Prologue to Part Two: Reading Education Through the Social Lens

If Part One was concerned with the philosophical foundations and structural architecture of Bangladesh's education system, Part Two descends into the social world in which that system actually operates. Philosophy tells us what education ought to be. History tells us how it came to be what it is. But sociology and anthropology tell us something different and in many respects more urgent: they tell us what education actually does, what it produces in the lives of real

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people, how it functions within the dense web of social relationships, cultural meanings, power arrangements, and community identities that constitute the lived reality of Bangladesh.

The sociology of education is not simply a matter of statistics, though statistics are important tools. It is a matter of understanding the relationship between educational institutions and the social structures within which those institutions are embedded. It asks: how does education reproduce social inequality? How does it legitimate particular hierarchies of knowledge and social worth? How does it shape, and how is it shaped by, the identities of class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and geography that organize Bangladeshi society? These are questions that cannot be answered from ministerial offices in Dhaka or from the pages of curriculum documents. They must be investigated in the field, in classrooms and communities, in the lived experience of students, teachers, parents, and administrators.

The anthropology of education adds another dimension. Anthropology is the discipline concerned with culture in its full complexity: the systems of meaning, value, practice, and belief through which human communities make sense of their world and organize their collective life. Educational anthropology asks how the school as an institution is itself a cultural form, how it carries particular cultural assumptions about knowledge, authority, childhood, and the proper relations between generations, and how these cultural assumptions interact, sometimes productively and sometimes destructively, with the cultural worlds that students bring from their homes and communities. In a society as culturally diverse as Bangladesh, with its complex mix of Bengali secular nationalism, Islamic religious identity, indigenous ethnic communities, and class-differentiated cultural practices, the anthropological question is not merely academic. It is at the heart of the practical and political challenge of building an educational system that serves all Bangladeshis.

Part Two is organized around eleven chapters. Chapter One examines the social class structure of Bangladeshi society and its relationship to educational stratification. Chapter Two explores the anthropology of the classroom, including the hidden curriculum and the cultural dynamics of teacher-student relations. Chapter Three analyzes the sociology of language policy, focusing on the complex relationship between Bengali, English, Arabic, and the many indigenous languages of the country. Chapter Four examines gender, family structure, and the social construction of educational aspiration. Chapter Five turns to the sociology of religion and its role in educational differentiation. Chapter Six investigates the geography of educational inequality, focusing on rural-urban disparities and the specific challenges of the most marginalized regions. Chapter Seven examines teacher identity and professional culture. Chapter Eight analyzes the anthropology of examination culture, one of the most powerful cultural forces in Bangladeshi educational life. Chapter Nine explores migration, diaspora, and transnational educational dynamics. Chapter Ten investigates the sociology of educational reform, asking why systemic change is so consistently difficult. Chapter Eleven examines the situation of indigenous communities and the challenge of educational inclusion in a system designed around the Bengali majority.

Throughout, this analysis draws on the theoretical resources of sociology and anthropology while grounding its arguments in empirical evidence and in the specific historical and political conditions of Bangladesh. The aim is not merely description but critical understanding, an

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understanding adequate to the task of building an educational system worthy of the aspirations of one of the world's most populous and dynamic nations.

Chapter One: The Social Class Structure of Schooling and the Reproduction of Hierarchy

1.1 Bourdieu in Bangladesh: Social Reproduction and Educational Capital

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) developed the most powerful theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between education and social class in the twentieth century. His concepts of cultural capital, social capital, habitus, and the field of education have been applied across dozens of national contexts, and their relevance to Bangladesh is immediate and profound.

For Bourdieu, education is not simply a mechanism for the transmission of knowledge. It is a mechanism for the reproduction of social hierarchy. The education system appears to distribute its rewards on the basis of individual merit and academic achievement. In reality, Bourdieu argued, it distributes its rewards on the basis of cultural capital, the forms of knowledge, linguistic competence, cultural taste, and intellectual disposition that children from privileged social backgrounds acquire from their families and social environments. Children from culturally and economically privileged backgrounds arrive at school already possessing the cultural capital that the school values and rewards. Children from poor and marginalized backgrounds do not possess this capital. The school treats its own cultural standards as neutral and universal, rather than as the specific cultural property of the privileged, and thereby systematically disadvantages children from non-privileged backgrounds while presenting this disadvantage as the natural consequence of differences in ability or effort.

This analysis maps with devastating precision onto the educational reality of Bangladesh. The child of an educated, English-speaking, urban professional family in Dhaka arrives at an elite English-medium school with substantial cultural capital: she is fluent in English, accustomed to reading books and discussing ideas, familiar with the cultural codes of academic achievement, and possessed of a social confidence and articulateness that the school values and rewards. The child of a poor farmer in Sylhet or a day laborer in Dhaka's garment district arrives at a government school or a Madrasa with a very different cultural endowment: she may be fluent in a regional dialect rather than standard Bengali, unaccustomed to the practices of reading and writing outside of religious texts, unfamiliar with the cultural codes of academic performance, and possessed of a social demeanor shaped by the hierarchies of rural or urban working-class life rather than the confident self-presentation of the educated class.

The school does not treat these two children as having different but equally valuable cultural endowments. It treats one as the standard of educational achievement and the other as deficient. The Bourdieusian insight is that this is not a natural or inevitable outcome of differences in ability. It is a structural outcome of an educational system that has been designed, often unconsciously, around the cultural capital of the dominant class.

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1.2 The Three-Stream System as Class Segregation

The most visible expression of class-based educational stratification in Bangladesh is the three-stream system described in Part One. The English-medium stream, the Bengali-medium general stream, and the Madrasa stream do not simply offer different educational philosophies or different curricular emphases. They serve, and reproduce, different social classes.

The English-medium stream is, with important exceptions, the educational system of the urban professional class and the business elite. The fees charged by the leading English-medium schools in Dhaka are beyond the reach of all but a tiny minority of Bangladeshi families. Monthly tuition fees at the most prestigious English-medium institutions can range from fifteen thousand to fifty thousand taka or more, in a country where the median household monthly income is considerably lower. The students who attend these schools are destined, by the structural logic of their educational experience, for the upper tiers of the Bangladeshi economy and, very often, for higher education in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, or Canada. Their education prepares them, explicitly and implicitly, for a form of professional and social life that is oriented toward the global rather than the local.

The Bengali-medium general education stream serves a much broader social range, from urban lower-middle-class families to rural peasant families. But within this stream, quality is deeply stratified. The best Bengali-medium schools, typically the established government schools in divisional cities and the elite private schools that follow the NCTB curriculum, offer significantly better educational quality than the average government school in a rural sub-district. The educational experience of a child at Dhaka Collegiate School or Rajshahi Government High School is categorically different from that of a child at an average rural government school, not merely in terms of physical facilities but in terms of teacher quality, instructional time, access to books and materials, and the social expectations that permeate the school culture.

The Madrasa stream serves disproportionately the poor and the rural, though this generalization requires qualification. The Qawmi Madrasa system, which is entirely privately funded through religious donations (zakat and sadaqah) and small student fees, draws overwhelmingly from the rural poor and from urban migrant communities. It offers education at little or no financial cost, which makes it the only accessible option for many families. The Aliya Madrasa system, which is government-funded, serves a somewhat broader social range but remains disproportionately associated with rural and lower-class communities.

The class segregation of the three streams is not merely a matter of who attends each stream. It is a matter of what each stream leads to. The English-medium stream leads to global higher education and elite professional careers. The Bengali-medium general stream, at its best, leads to domestic higher education and middle-class professional careers; at its worst, it leads to a public examination certificate that provides little competitive advantage in the labor market. The Madrasa stream, particularly the Qawmi system, leads to careers in religious leadership (Imam, khatib, religious teacher) that, while socially respected, are not well-compensated financially and do not provide access to the formal economy's higher-status positions.

1.3 The Coaching Industry as a Class Mechanism

One of the most sociologically significant features of Bangladesh's educational landscape is the private coaching industry, which has grown to massive proportions and which functions as a powerful mechanism of class differentiation within the ostensibly universal public education system.

Private tutoring is not new in Bangladesh. Students have always sought additional instruction outside the formal school system. What is new is the scale and systematicity of the coaching industry, which has effectively created a two-tier educational system within the formal system. Students who can afford private coaching receive a level of examination preparation that students who cannot afford it do not receive, and this additional preparation translates directly into higher examination scores and better access to higher education.

The economics of the coaching industry are revealing. A student preparing for the Secondary School Certificate examination in Dhaka might attend coaching centers for three or four subjects simultaneously, at fees that can range from one thousand to five thousand taka per subject per month. A student from a middle-class family might spend twenty to forty thousand taka per year on coaching during the two years of secondary school. This represents a very significant investment for most Bangladeshi families. For the poorest families, it is simply impossible. The result is that examination performance, which is presented as a measure of individual merit and academic achievement, is significantly shaped by family wealth and the ability to purchase additional educational services.

The coaching industry has also deeply distorted the formal education system itself. Because examination performance has become so heavily dependent on coaching, classroom teaching has in many schools been reduced to a perfunctory gesture. Teachers who are themselves involved in private coaching, either as coaches in coaching centers or as private tutors to individual students, have perverse incentives to invest less in their classroom teaching and more in their private tutoring services. The student who cannot afford private tuition is penalized not only by the absence of additional instruction but by the reduced quality of the classroom instruction that she does receive.

This dynamic was analyzed with striking clarity by Bangladeshi educational economist Manzoor Ahmed in research published in the early 2020s, and has been confirmed by numerous subsequent studies. The coaching industry represents what Ahmed called an "educational shadow system" that shadow's the formal system in terms of its scale, its influence on student outcomes, and the resources it commands, while being almost entirely invisible to official educational statistics and policy analysis.

1.4 Social Mobility, Credential Inflation, and the Diploma Disease

The dominant popular understanding of education in Bangladesh is profoundly meritocratic in its aspiration. Education is widely understood as the principal mechanism of social mobility, as the means by which a child born into poverty can achieve a better life than her parents. This aspiration is not irrational. There are genuine stories of upward social mobility through education in Bangladesh, and the expansion of literacy and schooling over the past five decades has

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provided many millions of people with access to economic opportunities that were closed to their parents.

But the meritocratic promise of education in Bangladesh has increasingly collided with two structural realities: the credential inflation produced by the rapid expansion of higher education, and what the British economist Ronald Dore (1976) called the "diploma disease," the tendency for educational qualifications to become ends in themselves rather than means to the development of genuine knowledge and skill.

Credential inflation is a global phenomenon, but it is particularly acute in Bangladesh. As the number of university graduates has expanded rapidly, the economic value of a university degree has declined. A bachelor's degree that provided reliable access to middle-class employment in the 1980s no longer does so. Employers have responded to credential inflation by raising their hiring requirements, demanding master's degrees or specialized qualifications for positions that previously required only a bachelor's degree. Students have responded by extending their educational careers, pursuing additional qualifications in the hope of maintaining or improving their competitive position. The result is a credentialing arms race in which everyone invests more in qualifications while the average economic return to those qualifications declines.

The diploma disease in Bangladesh manifests in a profound disconnect between educational credentials and actual competence. Students who have obtained Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary Certificate qualifications often lack the literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills that those qualifications are supposed to certify. University graduates frequently lack the knowledge and skills associated with their degrees. Employers consistently report that graduates are not "job ready," that they lack both the technical skills and the generic skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, that employment requires. This gap between credential and competence is not simply an accident of implementation. It reflects a deep structural feature of a system that has been organized around the passing of examinations rather than the development of genuine learning.

1.5 The Political Economy of Educational Access: Who Benefits and Who Pays

The question of who benefits from and who pays for Bangladesh's education system is a political economy question as much as an educational one. The formal structure of public education in Bangladesh is nominally egalitarian: primary education is free and compulsory, secondary and higher secondary education is heavily subsidized, and public higher education is provided at tuition fees far below the actual cost of provision. This apparently egalitarian structure conceals a significant reality: the benefits of public educational investment flow disproportionately to the already privileged.

This phenomenon, known in development economics as the "education subsidy paradox," works as follows. Public spending on education at the primary and lower secondary levels does benefit the poor, because the poor do send their children to public schools at these levels. But public spending on higher education disproportionately benefits the rich, because access to public university education is determined primarily by performance on highly competitive entrance examinations, and performance on these examinations is strongly correlated with prior

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educational quality and private coaching investment. The student who attends an elite secondary school and benefits from private coaching is far more likely to pass the Dhaka University entrance examination than the student who attended a rural government school without coaching. When the former student attends a public university at highly subsidized tuition fees, she is in effect receiving a large public subsidy that is financed in part by the taxes of the poor family whose child failed the entrance examination.

This analysis does not mean that public higher education should not be subsidized. It means that the distribution of the benefits of public educational investment requires careful political attention and that the subsidy structure of the educational system has distributional consequences that are often regressive rather than progressive. Bangladesh's failure to tax the wealthy sufficiently to provide genuinely adequate public education across the system, combined with the concentration of the best public educational institutions in urban areas and the concentration of private educational investment by wealthy families, has produced an educational system that, despite its egalitarian formal structure, systematically advantages the already advantaged.

Chapter Two: The Anthropology of the Classroom: Culture, Power, and the Hidden Curriculum

2.1 The Concept of the Hidden Curriculum

The concept of the "hidden curriculum" was developed by educational sociologist Philip Jackson in his landmark 1968 work "Life in Classrooms," and has since been elaborated by a rich tradition of educational anthropology and critical pedagogy. The hidden curriculum refers to the lessons that schools teach implicitly, through their social organization, their routines, their reward structures, and their cultural atmosphere, rather than explicitly through their formal curriculum content.

In the hidden curriculum, students learn not only mathematics and Bengali and history. They learn how to sit, how to speak, when to be silent, how to relate to authority, what kinds of knowledge count as legitimate, who has the right to ask questions and who has the duty to provide answers, what the proper relationship between the individual and the institution is, and a host of other social and cultural lessons that shape their identities and their orientation toward the world.

The hidden curriculum of Bangladesh's school system is a powerful and largely unreflective force. It teaches, among other things, the following lessons that deserve careful examination: that knowledge is something that teachers possess and students receive; that the correct answer to every question already exists and the student's task is to find and reproduce it; that authority is to be respected without question; that examinations are the ultimate measure of learning and therefore of personal worth; that the Bengali-medium school and its cultural codes are the standard of educated identity; and that certain forms of indigenous knowledge, local practice, and regional cultural expression are less valuable than the knowledge codified in the national curriculum.

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2.2 Classroom Culture and the Pedagogy of Silence

The dominant classroom culture in Bangladesh's school system is one of what might be called the "pedagogy of silence": a pedagogical regime in which students are expected to be quiet, receptive, and obedient, while the teacher talks, explains, and instructs. This pedagogical culture is not unique to Bangladesh. It characterizes many education systems in South and Southeast Asia, and it has deep roots in both the colonial educational tradition and in pre-colonial conceptions of teacher-student relations in both the Hindu and Islamic educational traditions.

In the Islamic educational tradition, the relationship between the teacher (Ustad or Muallem) and the student (Talib) is modeled on the relationship between one who possesses sacred knowledge and one who seeks to receive it. Respect for the teacher is not merely a social convention but a religious and spiritual obligation. To question the teacher is, in certain formulations, to question the authority of the tradition the teacher represents. This conception of the teacher-student relationship, while it has its own spiritual depth and coherence within its own framework, translates in the context of mass secular education into a classroom culture in which questioning, arguing, and expressing independent views are experienced as violations of social propriety.

In the colonial educational tradition, the Macaulayan school reproduced the hierarchical social relations of colonial society within the classroom. The teacher, educated in Western knowledge, represented a form of cultural authority that the student was expected to receive without criticism. The pedagogical relationship of colonial education was fundamentally one of cultural submission, and the habits of classroom passivity that this produced have proven remarkably durable.

The consequence of this pedagogy of silence for student learning is well-documented. Students who are not encouraged to ask questions, express views, make mistakes in public, and engage in substantive intellectual argument do not develop the cognitive habits associated with deep learning. They develop instead the habit of surface learning, the acquisition of information sufficient to pass examinations without the development of genuine understanding. The pedagogical anthropology of the Bangladeshi classroom is one of the most important and least addressed causes of the learning crisis.

Field research in Bangladeshi classrooms, conducted by researchers from BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, the University of Dhaka, and various international institutions, has consistently found a remarkably consistent pattern: teachers talk for the vast majority of classroom time; student responses consist overwhelmingly of choral recitation or the reproduction of textbook language; opportunities for student-initiated questions or discussion are rare; and the physical organization of the classroom, with students sitting in rows facing the teacher, reinforces the directive, one-way nature of the pedagogical transaction.

The 2023 curriculum reform, discussed in Part One, represents an ambitious attempt to change this classroom culture. Its emphasis on activity-based learning, collaborative projects, and competency demonstration rather than written examination is, in effect, an attempt to transform the hidden curriculum of the Bangladeshi classroom. The political and pedagogical challenges of this attempt are enormous, because classroom culture is not simply a matter of teacher behavior.

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It is embedded in the social expectations of students, parents, school administrators, and the wider society, and it cannot be changed simply by revising curriculum documents or producing new textbooks.

2.3 The Culture of the Body: Corporal Punishment, Discipline, and the Embodied School

Educational anthropology has taught us to pay attention not only to what is said and thought in schools but to what is done with bodies. The school is a bodily institution: it organizes bodies in space, regulates their movement and posture, controls their temporal rhythms, and uses the body as a site of discipline and control. Michel Foucault's analysis of the school as a "disciplinary institution," one of a class of modern institutions alongside the prison, the hospital, and the military barracks, that subject the body to normalizing surveillance and discipline, is directly relevant to the Bangladeshi school context.

Corporal punishment has been legally prohibited in Bangladesh's schools since 2011, when the High Court Division of the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional as a violation of children's rights under the Constitution. This legal prohibition was reinforced by the government's adoption of child protection policies and by guidelines issued by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. Yet field research consistently finds that corporal punishment remains widespread in practice, particularly in rural schools and Madrasa institutions. A 2024 survey by the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust found that a significant majority of students in rural government schools reported experiencing or witnessing physical punishment in the classroom within the previous academic year.

The persistence of corporal punishment despite its legal prohibition reveals several important sociological truths. First, it reveals the gap between formal law and social practice that characterizes many aspects of Bangladeshi institutional life. Second, it reveals that the bodily discipline of the classroom is experienced by many teachers and parents as not merely permissible but necessary, a reflection of deeply embedded cultural beliefs about the proper relationship between authority and the child, between the adult and the young. Third, it reveals the limits of top-down legal reform in changing educational practice when the social norms and cultural values that underpin that practice remain unchanged.

Beyond corporal punishment, the embodied culture of Bangladeshi schools includes a range of practices that shape students' bodily experience of education: the requirement to stand when a teacher or authority figure enters the room; the practice of morning assembly in which students stand in lines for inspection; the gender segregation of classroom seating in many schools; the uniform requirements that standardize bodily appearance; and the spatial organization of classrooms that situates the teacher at the front and the students in rows. Each of these practices carries cultural meaning and produces particular effects on student identity, social relationship, and intellectual orientation.

2.4 Teacher Authority and the Cultural Construction of Expertise

The cultural construction of teacher authority in Bangladesh is a complex and fascinating subject. The teacher occupies a distinctive social position in Bangladeshi culture, one shaped by

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multiple overlapping traditions. In the Hindu tradition, the Guru is a figure of almost sacred authority, the one who dispels the darkness of ignorance and leads the student to the light of knowledge. In the Islamic tradition, the Alim or religious scholar occupies a position of honor as the custodian of divine knowledge and the guide to righteous living. In the colonial tradition, the English-educated teacher represented the embodiment of modern knowledge and its social rewards.

These cultural constructions of teacher authority persist in the present and shape the social relations of the classroom in ways that are not always educationally productive. The teacher who is expected to be an authority cannot admit ignorance, cannot learn from students, cannot revise her understanding in response to student questions or objections. The cultural expectation of teacher omniscience creates a classroom culture in which intellectual uncertainty and exploratory thinking are structurally impossible, because they would undermine the cultural authority on which the teacher's social position depends.

This analysis helps explain one of the most puzzling features of Bangladesh's educational landscape: the gap between the official commitment to learner-centered, inquiry-based pedagogy and the actual practice of directive, teacher-centered instruction. It is not simply that teachers are unwilling to change. Many teachers are genuinely committed to the principles of learner-centered education, and many have participated in training programs designed to develop these practices. The problem is that the social and cultural conditions of the classroom make genuinely learner-centered practice extremely difficult to sustain. A teacher who invites student questioning and discussion risks undermining her own cultural authority in the eyes of students, parents, and fellow teachers. A teacher who admits uncertainty risks being perceived as incompetent. The cultural norms of teacher authority are so deeply embedded that they function as structural constraints on pedagogical change, even when individual teachers are intellectually persuaded of the value of different approaches.

2.5 The School as Community Institution: Social Functions Beyond Education

The school in Bangladesh is not merely an educational institution. It is a community institution that performs a range of social functions beyond the transmission of knowledge and skills. Understanding these social functions is essential for understanding why the school operates as it does and why change is so difficult.

One of the most important social functions of the school is certification: the production of official credentials that signal status, competence, and eligibility for various social and economic opportunities. The certificate obtained from the Secondary School Certificate examination is not valued primarily as evidence of educational achievement. It is valued as a social document, a credential that opens particular doors and closes others. This certification function of the school is so important to families that they invest enormous resources, financial and otherwise, in ensuring that their children obtain the required certificates, regardless of whether the process of obtaining those certificates has produced genuine learning.

A second important social function of the school is socialization: the production of particular social identities, values, and behavioral dispositions. The school socializes students into

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particular conceptions of Bangladeshi national identity, of gender roles and relations, of religious obligation, and of the proper relationship between the individual and the collectivity. This socializing function is sometimes explicit, as in the teaching of moral education or religious instruction. More often it is implicit, embedded in the routines, rituals, and social relations of school life.

A third social function of the school is social sorting: the allocation of students to different social positions and life trajectories on the basis of their educational performance. The examination system is the primary mechanism of social sorting, determining who proceeds to higher levels of education and who is diverted into vocational training, informal employment, or domestic life. This sorting function is experienced as legitimate because it is framed in terms of merit and individual achievement, but as we have seen, it is in practice shaped by social class, geography, and access to resources in ways that reproduce existing inequalities rather than transcending them.

Chapter Three: Language, Identity, and the Sociology of Educational Language Policy

3.1 The Language Question as a National Obsession

No dimension of Bangladesh's educational sociology is more politically charged, more culturally complex, or more philosophically rich than the question of language. Bangladesh is, in a fundamental sense, a nation born from a language movement: the protests against the Pakistani state's imposition of Urdu as the sole national language, which reached their tragic climax on 21 February 1952 with the shooting of student protesters in Dhaka, gave Bangladesh both its national martyr day (now observed globally as International Mother Language Day) and one of the founding myths of its national identity.

This history gives the Bengali language a status in Bangladesh that goes far beyond its function as a medium of communication. Bengali is a national symbol, a marker of cultural identity, and a vehicle of historical memory. The Language Movement of 1952 and the political identity of Bengali-speaking Muslims in what was then East Pakistan are foundational to the Bangladeshi national imagination. Any educational policy that touches the question of language policy therefore touches the deepest nerves of national identity and political emotion.

And yet the reality of Bangladesh's educational language landscape is far more complex than the simple nationalist narrative of Bengali as the language of liberation and identity would suggest. Bangladesh is a multilingual society in which standard literary Bengali is not the mother tongue of all citizens. The country's diverse regional dialects, from the Chittagong dialect (which is sufficiently different from standard Bengali to be effectively incomprehensible to many standard Bengali speakers) to the Sylheti dialect, to the various indigenous languages of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Barind region, constitute a rich and largely unrecognized linguistic diversity. And English, the language of the colonial power that was expelled from Bangladesh in 1971, remains the language of elite education, of higher professional life, of international connection, and of social aspiration for a significant and growing segment of the population.

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3.2 The Politics of Bengali-Medium Education

The Bengali-medium general education system is the institutional expression of the linguistic nationalism that gave Bangladesh its independence. The constitutional mandate that Bengali is the official state language, and the associated commitment to Bengali-medium education across the public system, reflects the deepest values of the independence movement. In this sense, the Bengali-medium school is not merely a pedagogical institution. It is a political institution, the embodiment of the principle that Bangladesh belongs to Bengali speakers and that the education of Bengali-speaking children should happen in their own language.

This nationalist commitment to Bengali-medium education has had genuinely positive dimensions. Research in language acquisition and educational psychology consistently shows that children learn most effectively when they are taught in the language they speak at home, particularly in the early years of schooling. The commitment to Bengali-medium education at the primary level is, from this perspective, educationally sound as well as politically important. The development of a rich Bengali-language curriculum and of Bengali-language educational materials has been a significant achievement, producing textbooks, children's literature, educational media, and pedagogical resources that express the cultural heritage of Bangladesh in its own language.

But the nationalist commitment to Bengali-medium education has also had problematic dimensions. The most significant is the treatment of linguistic minorities. Children who speak languages other than standard Bengali as their home language, including the speakers of Chittagong regional dialects, Sylheti, and the indigenous languages of the Hill Tracts, are effectively subjected to a form of linguistic discrimination in the Bengali-medium school system. They are taught in a language that is not their mother tongue, using materials that do not reflect their cultural experience, by teachers who may not speak or understand their home language. The educational consequences of this linguistic mismatch are significant: research consistently shows that children who are schooled in a language different from their mother tongue show lower levels of literacy, higher dropout rates, and lower overall educational achievement than children who are schooled in their first language.

The reluctance of the Bangladeshi state to address this linguistic diversity in its educational system reflects the political sensitivity of the language question. Any suggestion that the Bengali-medium system disadvantages linguistic minorities risks being read as an attack on the national language and the national identity it symbolizes. The children of the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo, Santal, and other indigenous communities who struggle in Bengali-medium schools are, in this political framing, an inconvenient complication to a national narrative that cannot accommodate their linguistic distinctiveness.

3.3 English and the Grammar of Social Distinction

The role of English in Bangladesh's educational system is a sociological phenomenon of extraordinary importance. English is simultaneously the language of the colonial oppressor, the language of global economic opportunity, the language of social distinction, and the language of

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elite aspiration. These multiple identities are not simply contradictory. They exist together in a complex and dynamic relationship that shapes the lives of millions of Bangladeshis.

The ability to speak and write English fluently is one of the most powerful markers of social distinction in Bangladesh. In the formal labor market, English fluency is a prerequisite for the highest-status and best-compensated positions. In the garment industry, the managers who negotiate with international buyers must speak English. In the development sector, the organizations funded by international donors require English-speaking staff. In the legal profession, the higher courts conduct their proceedings largely in English, and the relevant legal texts are in English. In medicine and engineering, the professional literature and the international connections of the field require English proficiency. In every domain of elite professional life in Bangladesh, English is the language of power and opportunity.

This social function of English has profound educational consequences. The English-medium school, which provides genuine English-language education, becomes a powerful instrument of social reproduction for the elite. The child who graduates from an English-medium school with genuine English fluency and competence in the Edexcel or Cambridge curriculum has been equipped for access to elite global opportunities that are closed to the Bengali-medium graduate. The English-medium school is therefore not merely a school. It is a mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of elite social position.

For the Bengali-medium student, the English language presents a different and deeply frustrating challenge. English is a compulsory subject at all levels of the Bengali-medium general education system, from primary to higher secondary. Students spend years studying English, completing English grammar exercises, reading English passages, and writing English compositions in their textbooks. Yet the vast majority of Bengali-medium graduates emerge from secondary school without genuine communicative competence in English. They have learned "examination English," the ability to answer the specific question types that appear on the public examinations, without developing the ability to listen, speak, read, and write in English in real communicative situations. This "examination English" is essentially useless in the labor market and in higher education, where genuine English competence is required.

The failure of English teaching in the Bengali-medium system is one of the most consequential and most discussed problems in Bangladesh's educational landscape. It has been the subject of numerous reform initiatives, from the Communicative Language Teaching reform of the 1990s to the more recent attempts to improve English teaching through teacher development programs and revised textbooks. None of these initiatives has produced systematic improvement at scale, and the reasons for this failure illuminate important structural features of the educational system.

The deepest reason for the failure of English teaching in the Bengali-medium system is not methodological. It is structural. Genuine communicative English competence requires substantial exposure to authentic English language in a rich variety of contexts. It requires teachers who themselves speak English fluently and can provide authentic language models. It requires a social environment in which English is actually used for real communication, not merely practiced as a school subject. These conditions exist in English-medium schools, where English is the medium of instruction and the language of the school community. They do not exist in

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most Bengali-medium schools, where English is a subject taught for one or two periods per day by teachers who are themselves not fluent English speakers, in a school environment where Bengali is the language of all other communication.

No amount of methodological reform can overcome this structural reality. The solution to the English teaching failure in the Bengali-medium system is not a different teaching method. It is a fundamental rethinking of the conditions under which English is taught and learned, including the question of how to build a corps of genuinely English-competent teachers in the public system and how to create more English-rich learning environments in schools that are currently Bengali monolingual.

3.4 Arabic, Urdu, and the Languages of Religious Identity

The Arabic language occupies a distinctive position in Bangladesh's educational landscape. In the Madrasa system, Arabic is not simply a foreign language subject. It is the language of the Quran, the language of divine revelation, and the language of the entire corpus of classical Islamic scholarship. The learning of Arabic is therefore not merely an educational activity but a religious obligation and a spiritual practice. For millions of Bangladeshi children who attend Maktabs and Madrasas, Arabic is the first language of literacy, the language in which they learn to read, to chant, to memorize, and eventually (in the case of those who pursue advanced Madrasa education) to write and argue with scholarly sophistication.

The educational sociology of Arabic instruction in Bangladesh is complex and poorly understood by educational policymakers, who tend to treat Arabic either as simply a religious matter outside the scope of secular educational analysis, or as a problem to be "mainstreamed" by incorporating vocational and secular subjects into the Madrasa curriculum. Both approaches miss the deeper question of what the teaching and learning of Arabic means within the Madrasa community and what role it plays in the formation of Islamic identity and religious scholarship.

Urdu, the language of Pakistani nationalism, occupies a historically freighted position in Bangladesh's educational landscape. The imposition of Urdu as the sole national language of Pakistan, and the resistance to this imposition by Bengali-speaking Muslims of East Pakistan, was, as noted above, the founding political conflict of Bangladeshi national consciousness. Urdu is therefore culturally marked in Bangladesh as the language of the oppressor and of cultural colonialism. And yet Urdu also occupies an important place in the Madrasa educational tradition: the Deoband movement, which has been the most influential force in shaping the Qawmi Madrasa system in Bangladesh, was historically based in what is now India, conducted its scholarship in Urdu, and produced a vast literature of Islamic education in Urdu that remains central to the Qawmi curriculum. The Qawmi Madrasa student in Bangladesh therefore typically learns both Arabic (as the sacred language of the Quran) and Urdu (as the scholarly language of the Deoband tradition), creating a distinctive multilingual educational experience that is largely invisible to and misunderstood by the secular educational establishment.

3.5 Mother Tongue Education and the Unresolved Question of Linguistic Diversity

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The UNESCO principle that children learn most effectively when they are taught in their mother tongue has been endorsed internationally and is supported by a substantial body of research in educational linguistics and developmental psychology. Its application in Bangladesh is politically sensitive but educationally urgent.

The indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other marginalized regions speak languages that are entirely distinct from Bengali: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo, Santal, Munda, and many others. The commitment of successive Bangladeshi governments to providing mother-tongue education to these communities has been slow and inadequate. A pilot program of mother-tongue-based multilingual education was launched in 2010, providing pre-primary and early primary education in several indigenous languages alongside Bengali. This program was expanded in subsequent years and by the early 2020s covered a significant number of schools in indigenous areas. However, it has faced persistent challenges: the development of written scripts for oral languages, the training of teachers who can teach in indigenous languages, the production of appropriate educational materials, and the political sensitivity of any policy that appears to privilege non-Bengali languages in the national educational system.

The theoretical framework for understanding this challenge comes from the field of multilingual education, which has developed sophisticated models for transitioning children from home-language instruction in the early years to dominant-language instruction in later years while maintaining and developing proficiency in the home language. These models, associated with researchers such as Jim Cummins (whose interdependence hypothesis and concept of cognitive academic language proficiency have been enormously influential) and Virginia Yip, provide a robust evidence base for the educational benefits of mother-tongue-based multilingual education. The challenge in Bangladesh is not one of educational theory but of political will, administrative capacity, and the complex negotiations of a multilingual society organized around a powerful linguistic nationalist identity.

Chapter Four: Gender, Family, and the Social Construction of Educational Aspiration

4.1 The Gender Revolution in Bangladesh's Education: Achievement and Contradiction

Bangladesh's achievement of gender parity in primary and lower secondary enrollment is one of the most remarkable and internationally discussed educational developments in the Global South. In 2000, the country achieved gender parity at the primary level, and by the 2010s had achieved parity or female advantage at the secondary level. This achievement, in a country that was still classified as low-income and was struggling with very significant developmental challenges across many dimensions, surprised many observers and has been the subject of considerable scholarly and policy attention.

The achievement of gender parity in enrollment was driven by a combination of factors that deserve careful sociological analysis. The Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP), launched in 1994 with World Bank support, provided stipends directly to female secondary students from poor families, conditional on school attendance and examination

performance. This program had a dramatic effect on female enrollment at the secondary level, demonstrating the power of conditional cash transfers as a tool for changing enrollment behavior. Subsequent programs extended stipends to primary level and expanded the coverage and conditionality of the original program.

Beyond the stipend programs, the expansion of garment industry employment in Bangladesh from the 1980s onward created a powerful economic incentive for girls' education. The garment industry, which became the country's dominant export industry and employed primarily female workers, demonstrated to families that educated girls could earn incomes that contributed significantly to family welfare. The garment worker who could read instructions, communicate with supervisors, and manage her own affairs was more productive and more employable than the worker who could not. This economic logic, transmitted through family networks and community observation, shifted the calculation that many poor families made about the value of daughters' education.

And yet gender parity in enrollment has not translated into gender equality in educational quality, outcomes, or social power. Several important dimensions of gender inequality persist in Bangladesh's educational system and deserve careful analysis.

4.2 The Hidden Inequalities of Nominal Gender Parity

Enrollment statistics show girls in roughly equal numbers to boys in primary and secondary schools. But attendance, continuity, quality of learning, and the translation of schooling into educational outcomes reveal persistent patterns of gender inequality that the enrollment figures obscure.

Girls' attendance at school is more conditional than boys' attendance on a range of household factors. When household labor is needed, whether for childcare, domestic work, agricultural work during harvest season, or care for sick family members, girls are disproportionately the ones who miss school. This conditionality of girls' attendance reflects the different social roles that girls and boys are expected to play in the household economy, and it means that girls who are nominally enrolled frequently miss more school days than their male counterparts.

The quality of girls' educational experience in many schools is also shaped by gender in ways that disadvantage their learning. In co-educational schools, teacher attention and participation opportunities are often distributed unequally along gender lines. Research in Bangladeshi classrooms has found that teachers call on male students more frequently, direct more substantive questions to them, and allow them more time to respond, while female students are more often asked to recite or reproduce rather than to reason and explain. This differential treatment reflects and reinforces gendered assumptions about intellectual capacity and social assertiveness that pervade Bangladeshi society.

The secondary school environment presents particular challenges for girls. Concerns about girls' safety in traveling to and from school, about their exposure to harassment on the street and sometimes within the school itself, and about the threats to family honor (izzat) that attend girls' presence in public spaces, lead many families to withdraw girls from school at puberty or to

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impose restrictions on their schooling that limit their educational opportunity. Early marriage remains a significant challenge: despite the legal minimum age of marriage being set at eighteen for girls, child marriage rates remain high, and early marriage is a primary driver of girls' dropout from secondary school.

4.3 Patriarchy, Purdah, and the Geography of Female Educational Aspiration

The relationship between Islamic gender norms, including the practice of purdah (female modesty and seclusion), and girls' education in Bangladesh is a subject of considerable complexity and debate that resists simple narratives.

The popular Western narrative, which treats Islamic gender norms as straightforwardly inimical to female education, is empirically inaccurate when applied to Bangladesh. The majority of Bangladeshi Muslim families send their daughters to school, and many deeply religious families prioritize girls' education highly. The Islamic injunction that "seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" is understood by many families to apply to daughters as much as to sons. Many Madrasa institutions, particularly the Aliya system, actively educate girls. The largest women's university in the Islamic world, the Islamic University of Technology near Dhaka, is a significant institution of higher education for Bangladeshi Muslim women.

What is true is that the interpretation of Islamic gender norms varies significantly across class, region, and community in Bangladesh, and that more conservative interpretations of those norms do create constraints on girls' educational opportunity in certain contexts. The requirement that girls should not appear in public without family supervision, the preference for single-sex schooling, the expectation that girls should not travel long distances to school, and the social stigma attached to girls who are seen to be insufficiently modest in their dress or behavior, all create practical barriers to educational participation that affect girls disproportionately, particularly in more conservative rural communities.

These constraints are not simply religious. They are also economic and political. Patriarchal control over women's mobility and behavior is not merely a matter of religious conviction. It is a mechanism for the maintenance of male authority within the family and the community, and it has economic dimensions related to the distribution of labor and resources within the household. The restriction of girls' educational opportunity serves to maintain their dependence on male family members and their availability for domestic labor and early marriage.

The Bangladeshi feminist intellectual tradition, represented by scholars such as Maleka Begum, Najma Chowdhury, and the research community associated with the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, has engaged critically with these dynamics for decades. Feminist educational theory in the Bangladeshi context draws on both international feminist scholarship and indigenous feminist traditions that emphasize women's agency within, rather than simply against, the cultural frameworks of Bengali Muslim society.

4.4 The Sociology of Educational Aspiration: How Families Make Educational Decisions

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The educational decisions that families make, whether to send children to school, which school to send them to, how long to keep them in school, and what educational investments to make on their behalf, are not simply rational calculations of economic return. They are social decisions shaped by cultural norms, community expectations, family strategies, and the particular circumstances of household life.

Research on educational aspiration in Bangladesh has illuminated several important patterns. First, aspiration is almost universally high. Across classes, regions, and religious communities, the vast majority of Bangladeshi parents express the desire that their children should be educated. The aspiration to education is one of the most consistent and deeply held values in Bangladeshi society. But aspiration is differentially translated into educational investment and educational outcome depending on the material resources and social circumstances of the family.

Second, the pattern of educational investment within families is gendered in ways that reflect broader structures of gender inequality. In resource-constrained families, boys' education is typically prioritized over girls' education, because the economic return to sons' education, in the form of higher earning capacity and the ability to support aging parents, is typically seen as higher than the return to daughters' education, who will upon marriage belong to and benefit another family. This gendered logic of educational investment is not simply irrational. It reflects the real conditions of a society in which women's earning capacity is more constrained than men's and in which the social institution of marriage means that daughters' educational investments may be seen as accruing to the family of marriage rather than to the family of origin.

Third, the connection between educational aspiration and the specific character of local educational opportunity is crucial. Families aspire to the best education available in their social and geographical environment. For a middle-class family in Dhaka, the best education available might be an elite English-medium school. For a poor rural family, the best education available might be the local government primary school, supplemented by a Maktab for religious instruction. For a family in an area with a strong Madrasa tradition, the best education available might be a respected local Madrasa. Educational aspiration is not an abstract universal. It is shaped by local knowledge of what educational institutions exist, what they cost, what they lead to, and what is expected of educated people in the local community.

4.5 Educational Aspiration in the Garment Worker Community: A Sociological Case Study

The garment industry has been a transformative force in Bangladeshi society over the past four decades, and its relationship with education is a microcosm of many of the broader sociological dynamics discussed in this chapter. The garment workforce, which numbers in the millions and consists predominantly of young women from rural areas who have migrated to urban areas for work, represents a distinctive sociological formation whose educational dynamics deserve careful attention.

The typical garment worker has completed some years of primary schooling but has not completed secondary education. She left school either because of the economic pressure on her family (requiring her to contribute income), because of early marriage, or because the quality of the schooling available to her was insufficient to motivate continued enrollment. She has

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migrated to Dhaka or another industrial city, lives in overcrowded urban conditions, and works in a physically demanding job with limited legal protection and very limited opportunity for advancement without educational credentials.

The garment worker community has developed its own complex relationship with education. Many garment workers express strong aspirations for their children's education, often explicitly contrasting their own limited schooling with the educational futures they desire for their children. This intergenerational aspiration is powerful and genuine, and it has been a significant driver of improved enrollment and retention in communities with high proportions of garment worker families.

At the same time, the economic and social conditions of garment workers create real barriers to educational investment. The long working hours, the informal and often insecure character of housing arrangements, the distance from extended family support networks, the physical and psychological toll of factory work, and the low wages (which, while significantly higher than rural agricultural wages, are still insufficient for comfortable urban life) all limit the practical ability of garment worker families to invest adequately in their children's education. The schools available in the urban areas where garment workers live are often among the most overcrowded and under-resourced in the country.

Several civil society organizations, most notably BRAC and Underprivileged Children's Educational Programs (UCEP), have developed non-formal and informal education programs specifically designed to serve the children and adult family members of garment workers. These programs, which we will examine in detail in Part Eight, represent innovative attempts to adapt educational provision to the specific social and economic conditions of this community.

Chapter Five: Religion, Community, and the Sociology of the Three-Stream System

5.1 The Sociology of Religious Educational Choice

The decision by a family in Bangladesh to send a child to a Madrasa rather than a general school, or to a Qawmi Madrasa rather than an Aliya Madrasa, is not simply a statement of religious preference. It is a complex social act shaped by economic calculations, community belonging, cultural identity, family tradition, and a particular vision of the good life and the good person.

To understand the sociology of religious educational choice in Bangladesh, it is necessary to move beyond the secular/religious binary that dominates much of the academic and policy literature. This binary assumes that the choice between a Madrasa and a general school is equivalent to the choice between religious and secular education, between tradition and modernity, between Islamic and Bengali identity. In reality, the choice is far more complex and contextually determined.

For a poor rural family whose father and grandfather attended the local Madrasa, whose social networks are organized around the mosque and the madrasatic community, and whose vision of a

good life is centered on religious devotion, community service, and the respect accorded to Islamic learning, sending a child to the Madrasa is not a choice against modernity or a rejection of economic opportunity. It is a choice in favor of community, identity, and a particular form of human excellence that the family has every right to value. The critique that this choice represents educational conservatism or a barrier to development reflects the cultural assumptions of the educated secular middle class, not a universally valid standard of educational value.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the Qawmi Madrasa system's exclusive focus on traditional Islamic subjects, to the exclusion of mathematics, science, and the social sciences, does limit graduates' access to the formal economy and to certain domains of modern professional life. This limitation is real and consequential, and the family that sends a child to a Qawmi Madrasa knowing this limitation exists is making a genuine trade-off between forms of value that are not straightforwardly comparable.

5.2 The Aliya Madrasa System: Between Integration and Distinctiveness

The Aliya Madrasa system occupies a distinctive and politically complex position in Bangladesh's educational landscape. Unlike the Qawmi system, which is entirely independent of the state and has historically resisted state regulation and curriculum oversight, the Aliya system is integrated with the state educational system in several important respects: it receives government funding, its teachers are paid from the public educational budget, its curriculum has been standardized and is subject to government oversight, and its qualifications are recognized as equivalent to the corresponding qualifications in the general education stream.

This integration has important sociological consequences. The Aliya Madrasa is, in sociological terms, a hybrid institution: it combines the religious identity and community orientation of the traditional Madrasa with the state recognition and curriculum standardization of the general education system. Its students emerge with qualifications that are technically equivalent to those of general secondary education graduates, and many proceed to general higher education institutions or to professional careers in various fields.

The sociological significance of this hybridity is complex. On one hand, the Aliya system has successfully expanded access to secondary and higher education for rural and conservative Muslim communities that might have been unwilling to send their children to secular general schools. It has provided a path to qualified employment for many graduates who might otherwise have been confined to the informal economy or to the poorly compensated world of religious service. On the other hand, the integration of the Aliya system with the state has been contested within the Madrasa community itself, with critics arguing that the standardization of the curriculum has diluted the quality of Islamic scholarship and produced graduates who are neither fully equipped for modern professional life nor deeply grounded in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

5.3 The Qawmi Movement: Identity, Authority, and Political Power

The Qawmi Madrasa movement in Bangladesh is one of the most significant and least understood sociological phenomena in the country's educational and political landscape.

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Numbering several thousand institutions across the country, educating hundreds of thousands of students, and representing a substantial and organized segment of civil society, the Qawmi movement is a force of considerable social and political weight.

The Qawmi Madrasas operate outside the state educational system, refusing government funding and government curriculum oversight on the grounds that state interference would compromise the integrity of Islamic education. They are funded by private donations from the Muslim community, through zakat, sadaqah, and waqf endowments. Their curriculum is based on the Dars-e-Nizami, a curriculum developed in the eighteenth century by Mulla Nizamuddin Sihalawi at the Farangi Mahal institution in Lucknow, India, and transmitted to the Indian subcontinent through the Deoband tradition. This curriculum, with its emphasis on Arabic grammar and language, Quranic exegesis, Hadith science, Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic theology, and Persian literature, has remained remarkably stable for over two centuries, a fact that its proponents see as a strength (the preservation of authentic Islamic scholarship) and its critics see as a weakness (the failure to engage with modern knowledge and contemporary social conditions).

The political significance of the Qawmi movement reached a dramatic peak in 2017, when the government of Sheikh Hasina accorded official recognition to the Dawra-e-Hadith certificate, the highest qualification offered by the Qawmi Madrasa system, as equivalent to a Master's degree from a general university. This recognition was the outcome of negotiations with the Hefazat-e-Islam, the umbrella organization of Qawmi Madrasa institutions, and reflected both the political importance of the Qawmi movement as an electoral constituency and the government's ongoing effort to manage the relationship between the secular state and Islamic civil society.

The sociological implications of this recognition are significant and contested. For the Qawmi community, it represents a long-overdue acknowledgment of the value and legitimacy of Islamic scholarship. For critics, it represents the subordination of educational quality standards to political calculation, and raises questions about whether a curriculum designed in the eighteenth century can be genuinely equivalent to a twenty-first century university education.

5.4 Secularism, Religion, and the Constitutional Politics of Educational Identity

The relationship between the secular state and religious educational institutions is constitutionally and legally complex in Bangladesh, reflecting the deeper tensions in the country's constitutional identity. Bangladesh's Constitution was originally secular in orientation, a reflection of the secularist ideology of the independence movement. But successive amendments have changed this orientation significantly. The addition of "Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Rahim" (In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) to the preamble, and the declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1988, created a constitutional framework that is in some tension with the original secularist vision of independence.

This constitutional tension is mirrored in the educational system. The question of the proper relationship between secular and religious education, of how much religion should be incorporated into the general curriculum, of what role the state should play in regulating Madrasa education, and of whether a nominally secular state can maintain a three-stream educational

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system one part of which is organized around explicitly religious principles, are all unresolved constitutional and political questions that continue to animate Bangladesh's educational debates.

The jurisprudential dimension of this question is important. The principle of state neutrality in religious matters, which is central to liberal constitutional theory, would seem to require the state to be neutral between the secular and religious educational choices of its citizens. But this neutrality is in practice impossible to maintain, because educational funding decisions always privilege some forms of educational provision over others, and the decision about which forms to privilege is always a political choice with religious implications. The state's decision to fund the Aliya system but not the Qawmi system, and then to recognize Qawmi qualifications without integrating Qawmi institutions into the funding system, reflects the improvised and politically driven character of the state's management of this constitutional tension rather than any principled resolution of it.

Chapter Six: Rural-Urban Dynamics and the Geography of Educational Inequality

6.1 The Spatial Sociology of Educational Opportunity

The geography of educational opportunity in Bangladesh is not neutral. It is organized by a spatial hierarchy that privileges urban areas over rural ones, large cities over small ones, and accessible regions over remote ones. This spatial hierarchy is not accidental. It reflects the historical concentration of economic investment, political power, and social prestige in urban centers, and the consequent concentration of educational infrastructure, qualified teachers, and educational resources in those same centers.

Dhaka, as the political and economic capital, is the apex of the spatial educational hierarchy. The best schools, the most qualified teachers, the richest libraries, the most sophisticated educational facilities, and the greatest variety of educational choice are concentrated in Dhaka. Chittagong, Sylhet, Rajshahi, Khulna, and other divisional cities occupy the second tier: they have significantly better educational infrastructure than rural areas but are clearly inferior to Dhaka in the richness and quality of their educational provision. Rural areas occupy the third tier, with educational infrastructure that is significantly inferior to urban areas in quality, if not always in formal availability. And the most remote and marginal areas, the char lands (river islands), the coastal areas vulnerable to flooding and cyclone, the hill tracts with their indigenous communities, and the haor regions of the northeast, occupy the lowest tier of the educational geography, with the poorest facilities, the least qualified teachers, and the highest rates of educational disadvantage.

This spatial hierarchy has been documented in considerable detail by researchers at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, and the Power and Participation Research Centre, among others. Their findings consistently show that the quality of educational outcomes is strongly correlated with geographical location, even after controlling for socioeconomic background. A child from a poor family in Dhaka is likely to perform significantly better educationally than a child from an

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equally poor family in a remote rural area, because the educational infrastructure available to her is significantly better.

6.2 The Rural School: Infrastructure, Teacher Absence, and Institutional Resilience

The rural government school in Bangladesh is an institution whose social reality is a long way from the official image of the educational system. The formal description of the primary school system, with its standardized curriculum, trained teachers, and free textbooks, suggests an institution of reasonable quality and consistent operation. The reality, documented by years of field research and official assessment, is more challenging.

Teacher absence is one of the most documented and most significant problems of rural schooling in Bangladesh. Research by the World Bank and by the International Food Policy Research Institute found teacher absence rates in rural government schools that ranged from 16 to 25 percent on any given day, representing a substantial erosion of instructional time and educational quality. Teacher absence reflects multiple systemic problems: the concentration of qualified teachers in urban areas and the difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified teachers in remote rural postings; the practice of dual employment, in which teachers hold government positions while also working in coaching centers or other occupations; the weakness of supervision and accountability systems that make it possible for absent teachers to avoid consequences; and the cultural and social distance between some teachers and the rural communities they serve.

The physical infrastructure of rural schools presents additional challenges. Many rural government schools, despite significant investment in construction over the past decades, still lack adequate sanitation facilities, particularly for girls, which is a significant factor in girls' school attendance and retention. Many lack libraries or adequate supplies of books and learning materials beyond the free textbooks provided by the government. Many lack reliable electricity, which limits the use of digital learning tools even where they are theoretically available. Many lack adequate space for the student populations they serve, operating classes in overcrowded conditions that make effective teaching practically impossible.

And yet, in the face of these structural challenges, many rural schools display remarkable institutional resilience, driven by the commitment of individual teachers and head teachers, the support of local communities, and the aspiration of families for their children's educational futures. The sociological literature on "effective schools" in low-income contexts consistently finds that the quality of school leadership, the strength of the school community, and the quality of teaching are more important determinants of learning outcomes than physical infrastructure alone. Rural Bangladesh has its share of schools whose effectiveness, measured by learning outcomes and student development, far exceeds what their physical circumstances would predict, and the study of these schools is as instructive as the study of their more typical counterparts.

6.3 The Char, Haor, and Hill Tracts: Education at the Margins

The most geographically marginalized regions of Bangladesh present educational challenges of particular severity that deserve specific attention. The chars, the river islands formed by sediment deposits in Bangladesh's vast river systems, are among the most physically isolated and

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economically marginal areas of the country. They are subject to regular flooding and erosion, which makes permanent educational infrastructure difficult to maintain and which disrupts school calendars and student attendance patterns regularly. Schools built on chars may be flooded or destroyed by river erosion within years of their construction. Teachers assigned to char schools face physical isolation and the practical challenges of reaching their posting across often dangerous river crossings. Many char residents are among the poorest people in Bangladesh, with very limited access to economic opportunities and very high vulnerability to climate-related disasters.

The haor regions of northeastern Bangladesh, particularly in Sylhet and Sunamganj districts, present similar challenges. The haors are large shallow lakes that fill with water during the monsoon season, making transport and communication effectively impossible for months each year. Schools in haor areas must adapt their calendars to the seasonal flooding, and the disruption to regular schooling is significant. The isolation of haor communities also limits the economic opportunities available to families and reduces the perceived returns to education, which affects both enrollment and retention.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts, home to approximately thirteen indigenous ethnic groups with their own distinct languages, cultures, and social organizations, present educational challenges that combine geographical remoteness with the additional complexity of linguistic and cultural difference discussed in Chapter Three. The political history of the Hill Tracts, including the counterinsurgency conflict of the 1970s to 1990s and the peace accord of 1997, has left deep scars on the social and institutional fabric of the region, including its educational institutions. The implementation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education has been more advanced in the Hill Tracts than in other indigenous areas, reflecting both the political importance of the peace accord's commitments and the advocacy efforts of indigenous communities and civil society organizations. But progress has been slow, and the educational gap between the Hill Tracts and the rest of the country remains substantial.

6.4 Urbanization, Migration, and the Education of the Urban Poor

Bangladesh is undergoing rapid urbanization, driven by rural-to-urban migration that is itself driven by a combination of economic opportunity, environmental pressure, and the search for a better life. Dhaka is one of the fastest-growing cities in the world, and its population has expanded from approximately five million in the 1990s to over twenty million by the early 2020s. This rapid urbanization has created new and challenging educational dynamics in the urban periphery and in the dense informal settlements (commonly called slums, though this term inadequately captures their diversity and complexity) that house a very large proportion of Dhaka's population.

The children of urban migrants are among the most educationally marginalized in the country. Their families are typically poor, live in overcrowded and often illegal housing without secure tenure, and have limited access to public services including education. The government schools in urban areas are seriously overcrowded, running multiple shifts to accommodate student numbers that often far exceed designed capacity. The informal settlements in which many

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migrants live frequently lack nearby government schools, requiring children to travel distances that many families consider unsafe or impractical.

The educational dynamics of urban informality have been studied in considerable detail by researchers at BRAC and the Center for Urban Studies. Their findings reveal a complex landscape of formal, non-formal, and informal educational provision in urban slums, ranging from government and registered non-government schools to BRAC non-formal education centers, community-run schools, private "kendra" schools of varying quality, and informal Madrasa instruction. This diversity of provision reflects both the genuine demand for education among migrant families and the inadequacy of formal public provision to meet that demand.

Chapter Seven: The Sociology of Teacher Identity and Professional Culture

7.1 Who Becomes a Teacher in Bangladesh?

The sociology of the teaching profession is inseparable from the broader social and economic dynamics of Bangladeshi society. Who chooses to become a teacher, under what circumstances, and for what reasons, are questions whose answers reveal a great deal about the social status of teaching and the conditions under which teaching operates.

The social profile of the teaching workforce in Bangladesh has changed significantly over the past decades. In the immediate post-independence period, teaching was a profession that attracted educated individuals who saw it as a vocation, a form of service to the nation, and a respectable career. The social prestige of teaching, while not as high as that of the civil service or the medical and legal professions, was nonetheless substantial, reflecting the traditional honor accorded to the educated person in Bengali culture.

Today, the social profile of the teaching workforce is more complex and more varied. At the primary level, teaching has become a profession that is disproportionately chosen by individuals who could not secure other employment. The salary structure of primary school teachers, which has improved significantly over the past decades but remains modest relative to the educational qualifications required for appointment, and the difficult working conditions of many rural schools, make primary teaching an unattractive first choice for many educated Bangladeshis. The consequence is that teaching at the primary level often attracts individuals for whom it is a default option rather than a deliberate vocational choice.

At the secondary level, the social profile is somewhat more varied. Secondary school teachers typically hold higher educational qualifications, and the salary differential between secondary and primary teachers, while modest, attracts a somewhat more qualified pool. The prestige of teaching at the secondary level is also somewhat higher, particularly in schools with strong academic reputations. But the secondary teaching workforce shares with the primary workforce the systemic problem of inadequate pre-service training, insufficient in-service professional development, and the weak accountability structures that make it difficult to distinguish and reward excellent teaching from mediocre teaching.

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7.2 Teacher Training and its Discontents: The Gap Between Theory and Practice

The formal system of teacher training in Bangladesh consists of several types of institution: the Primary Training Institutes (PTIs) that provide the Certificate in Education (C-in-Ed) required for primary school appointment; the Teachers' Training Colleges (TTCs) that provide the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) required for secondary appointment; the National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE) that provides in-service training for primary teachers; and the National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM) that provides training for educational administrators.

The quality of pre-service teacher training provided by these institutions has been a persistent source of concern in Bangladesh's educational reform literature. Several systemic problems have been identified. First, the curriculum of teacher training programs has historically been heavily theoretical, with insufficient emphasis on practical classroom skills and on the development of pedagogical competence in the specific subjects and grade levels that trainees will teach. The Certificate in Education program, for example, has been criticized for devoting too much time to general educational theory and too little to the practical skills of classroom management, lesson planning, and assessment that beginning teachers most urgently need.

Second, the quality of instruction in teacher training institutions has been limited by the same structural problems that affect the rest of the educational system: understaffed institutions, inadequate resources, teachers who are themselves not highly qualified or pedagogically sophisticated, and limited connection with current research and international practice. A teacher trainer who was herself trained in a PTI thirty years ago and has had limited exposure to international developments in pedagogy, learning science, or curriculum design is not well-positioned to prepare the next generation of teachers for the challenges of a twenty-first century classroom.

Third, the disconnect between the formal teacher training curriculum and the actual conditions of the schools in which trainees will teach is a perennial problem. Training that is designed for a well-equipped school with small class sizes and supportive administration does not prepare teachers for the reality of a rural government school with forty or fifty students in a classroom, inadequate materials, and limited collegial support. This disconnect is not unique to Bangladesh. It is a global challenge in teacher education. But it is particularly acute in Bangladesh, where the conditions of the most disadvantaged schools are so far from the idealized conditions assumed in teacher training programs.

7.3 The Political Economy of the Teaching Profession: Pay, Conditions, and the Problem of Motivation

The political economy of the teaching profession in Bangladesh is one of the most important and least adequately addressed dimensions of the educational system's problems. Teachers are the central actors in the educational process. The quality of their knowledge, their pedagogical skill, their motivation, and their professional commitment are the proximate determinants of student learning. And yet the conditions in which teachers work in Bangladesh, particularly in the public

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primary and secondary systems, are in many respects deeply inhospitable to the development and maintenance of professional quality.

The salary structure of government teachers has improved significantly since the independence period, and several increments and revisions to the pay scale have occurred in recent decades. The National Pay Scale revisions of 2009 and 2015 improved teachers' nominal salaries, and the movement to bring teachers under the regular government pay scale rather than maintaining them on separate teaching service pay scales has been an important step toward improving both the financial security and the social status of public school teachers. But even with these improvements, government primary school teachers at the entry level earn salaries that, in the context of Dhaka's cost of living, are genuinely inadequate. Rural teachers face lower living costs, but also have fewer opportunities to supplement their incomes through legitimate means.

The inadequacy of teachers' salaries has a direct causal relationship with several of the most damaging features of Bangladesh's educational system. It incentivizes teacher absenteeism: a teacher who earns a meager government salary and who faces minimal consequences for absence has a clear incentive to use her time in ways that generate additional income, whether through private tutoring, agricultural work, or other employment. It incentivizes the deployment of teaching positions as a form of patronage: the low salaries of government teaching posts make them valuable as reliable income sources in rural areas where formal employment is scarce, which creates incentives for their allocation on the basis of political loyalty and personal connection rather than professional competence.

Most fundamentally, inadequate pay undermines the professionalism and motivation of those teachers who do show up and do try to teach. A teacher who knows that her salary is not commensurate with her qualifications, that her efforts are not recognized or rewarded, that excellent and mediocre teaching carry identical financial consequences, and that the social status of her profession is declining relative to other occupations, is a teacher whose professional motivation is structurally undermined. The development and maintenance of genuine teaching quality under these conditions requires remarkable personal commitment, and while such commitment certainly exists among many Bangladeshi teachers, it cannot be assumed as a policy premise.

7.4 The Gendered Dynamics of the Teaching Workforce

The gender dynamics of Bangladesh's teaching workforce are complex and have changed significantly over the past decades. At the primary level, the proportion of female teachers has increased substantially, driven partly by government policy (including requirements that schools maintain certain proportions of female teachers, particularly in schools serving girls) and partly by the changing social demographics of educated women. By the 2020s, female teachers constitute a majority at the primary level in many districts.

This feminization of the primary teaching workforce reflects and interacts with broader changes in the social position of women in Bangladesh. As more women complete secondary and tertiary education, a larger pool of qualified women is available for employment in occupations that have traditionally been considered suitable for women. Teaching, with its relatively modest physical

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demands, its compatibility with childcare responsibilities, and its social respectability, is often seen as an appropriate career for educated women. The teaching salary, while modest, provides an important source of income for educated women in both urban and rural contexts.

But the feminization of primary teaching is also associated with the declining social prestige of the profession. As educated men move into higher-paying professional opportunities in the growing formal economy, teaching becomes increasingly associated with women and with the lower status that women's work generally carries in a patriarchal society. This association of teaching with women's work reinforces and compounds the professional marginalization of teachers and the devaluation of their work that inadequate pay and weak accountability structures have already produced.

At the secondary and tertiary levels, women remain significantly underrepresented in the teaching workforce, particularly in mathematics, science, and technical subjects. This underrepresentation both reflects and reinforces the gender gap in STEM education discussed in Part One, and it limits the availability of female role models for girls in subjects where their participation is already low.

Chapter Eight: The Anthropology of Examination Culture

8.1 Examinations as Cultural Events

The public examination system of Bangladesh, organized around the Primary School Certificate (PSC), the Junior School Certificate (JSC), the Secondary School Certificate (SSC), and the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC), is not merely an educational assessment mechanism. It is a cultural institution of enormous social significance, one that organizes the rhythms of family life, shapes educational aspiration, defines social identity, and generates emotions of extraordinary intensity: hope, anxiety, pride, shame, and grief.

The SSC and HSC examinations, in particular, have the character of major cultural events in Bangladeshi society. The weeks before the examinations, students engage in intensive preparation that often occupies every waking hour, supported by coaching centers, private tutors, and family encouragement. The morning of the examination, families gather to see their children off with prayers, blessings, and expressions of intense concern. Parents wait anxiously outside examination halls. The results announcement, which in the pre-digital era meant physically going to the school to read a posted list and in the digital era means waiting for a text message or checking an online results database at the moment the results are released, is experienced as a moment of social reckoning whose consequences will determine the trajectory of the child's life.

The anthropological analysis of this examination culture reveals several important features. First, the examination has become the central organizing institution of Bangladeshi educational life. Everything that happens in schools is organized in relation to the examinations. Teaching is examination preparation. Learning is the acquisition of examination-relevant knowledge. The academic year is structured by the rhythm of examinations. Teacher quality is judged by

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examination results. School quality is ranked by examination results. The examination is, in a very real anthropological sense, the "core symbol" of the Bangladeshi educational system.

Second, the examination has become deeply intertwined with individual and family honor. A child who performs well in the SSC or HSC is a source of family pride, a validation of parental sacrifice and investment, and a social signal of family quality and capacity. A child who performs poorly is a source of shame, not only for the child but for the family. This intertwining of examination performance with family honor creates psychological pressures of extraordinary intensity, particularly for students from lower-middle-class families for whom educational success represents the primary available route to social mobility.

8.2 The Economics and Ethics of Examination Leakage

One of the most discussed and most damaging features of Bangladesh's examination culture is the systematic leakage of examination questions and answers prior to the examination date. Question leakage, which had become nearly systemic in the period leading up to the mid-2010s, represents a fundamental corruption of the examination system and raises important questions about the relationship between educational culture, institutional integrity, and social ethics.

The mechanics of question leakage in Bangladesh are well-documented. In the years when leakage was most severe, examination questions were reportedly being sold through networks involving printing press workers, low-level examination board staff, coaching center operators, and student networks, sometimes reaching students hours before the examination. The SSC examinations of 2016 and 2017 were particularly affected, with leaked questions circulating widely on social media. The government responded with a range of measures including digital encryption of examination materials, more secure distribution logistics, the prosecution of individuals involved in leakage, and the introduction of multiple sets of examination questions to reduce the impact of any single leakage.

These technical measures have had some success in reducing the most egregious forms of leakage, and the incidence of large-scale pre-examination question circulation has declined since the mid-2010s. But the problem has not been eliminated, and a culture of examination irregularity in various forms, including impersonation of candidates, smuggling of notes into examination halls, and collusion between supervisors and students, persists in many areas.

The ethical dimensions of examination leakage deserve philosophical analysis that goes beyond condemnation of individual dishonesty. The prevalence of examination cheating in Bangladesh reflects the extreme pressure that the examination system places on students and families, the inadequacy of the formal educational system in preparing students genuinely for examinations, and the perceived unfairness of a system in which family wealth and access to coaching provide such enormous advantages. When students believe that the system is fundamentally unfair, and when the stakes of examination failure are so high, the moral calculus of cheating shifts. This is not to excuse cheating, which is genuinely harmful to educational integrity. It is to say that examination cheating is a symptom of deeper structural problems that technical security measures alone cannot address.

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8.3 The Psychological Consequences of Examination Pressure

The psychological consequences of the intense examination pressure that characterizes Bangladesh's educational culture are serious and deserve sustained attention. Mental health research in Bangladesh, which has developed significantly in the past decade through the work of institutions such as the National Institute of Mental Health and the BRAC-supported mental health programs, consistently finds high rates of examination-related anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among secondary and higher secondary students.

The examination anxiety experienced by Bangladeshi students is not simply the normal nervousness that accompanies any high-stakes assessment. It is, for many students, a clinical level of anxiety that interferes with sleep, eating, social relationships, and the ability to learn effectively in the weeks and months before examination. Students report nightmares about failing examinations, physical symptoms including nausea and headache, social withdrawal, and in the most severe cases, suicidal ideation triggered by examination failure or the fear of failure.

The suicide rate among Bangladeshi students in the immediate aftermath of SSC and HSC results announcements has been a subject of media and public health concern. While systematic epidemiological data on examination-related student suicide is limited, media reports and civil society monitoring consistently document cases of suicide and suicide attempts by students who have performed below their own or family expectations in public examinations. This is a genuine public health emergency that intersects directly with educational policy, because the examination pressure that drives these tragedies is itself a product of educational system design choices.

The philosophical and psychological analysis of examination pressure connects with the broader question of what it means to educate for human wellbeing. An educational system that systematically produces high levels of psychological distress among the young people it is supposed to serve has failed in one of its most fundamental obligations. The utilitarian calculus that might justify examination pressure on the grounds of its contribution to economic efficiency or social mobility must be weighed against the genuine and serious human suffering that the examination culture imposes on millions of young Bangladeshis.

8.4 Reform of the Assessment System: International Debates and Bangladeshi Context

The reform of the assessment system is one of the most contested areas of Bangladesh's current educational policy debate. The 2023 curriculum reform introduced a significant shift in the assessment approach, moving away from the traditional written examination model toward a more diverse system of continuous and summative assessment that includes project work, presentations, portfolios, and peer and self-assessment alongside written tests. This shift in assessment philosophy is consistent with international trends in educational assessment and with the constructivist learning theory that underpins the new curriculum.

The reform of assessment has been welcomed by progressive educationists who see the traditional examination system as a fundamental obstacle to genuine learning. It has been opposed by parents and educators who question whether the new assessment methods are sufficiently rigorous, whether they can be implemented fairly across such a diverse and unequal

educational system, and whether they provide the credible, standardized signal that higher education institutions and employers need for selection decisions.

The international debate on assessment reform is relevant here. Drawing on the work of assessment theorists such as Dylan Wiliam (who has developed the concept of "formative assessment" and its role in improving learning), D. Royce Sadler (on feedback and the development of evaluative judgment), and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) researchers at the OECD, it is possible to construct a sophisticated argument for a more diverse and formative approach to assessment. At the same time, the work of economists of education such as Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, who have found strong correlations between the presence of standardized exit examinations and long-term educational achievement, suggests that the complete abandonment of standardized external assessment carries significant risks.

The Bangladeshi context adds dimensions to this debate that are not always recognized in the international literature. In a system with very low levels of teacher quality and very limited capacity for the exercise of reliable professional judgment about student achievement, the move to school-based continuous assessment raises serious questions about validity and reliability. Where the standard of teaching and assessment varies enormously across schools, the use of school-based assessment for high-stakes selection decisions may amplify existing inequalities rather than reduce them. A student in an elite school with highly qualified teachers and rigorous internal assessment standards may receive quite different grades for the same quality of work as a student in a poor rural school with less qualified teachers and lower standards of internal assessment. This comparability problem is fundamental and has not yet been adequately addressed in Bangladesh's assessment reform plans.

Chapter Nine: Migration, Diaspora, and Transnational Educational Dynamics

9.1 The Bangladeshi Diaspora and Its Educational Dimensions

Bangladesh has one of the largest diasporas in the world relative to its population. Millions of Bangladeshi citizens live and work abroad, primarily in the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman), Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore), the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, and several other countries. This large and geographically dispersed diaspora has significant implications for Bangladesh's domestic educational system, for the educational experience of Bangladeshi children abroad, and for the transnational flow of educational ideas, resources, and aspiration.

The economic dimension of diaspora-education linkage is most immediately visible in the role of remittances in financing educational investment. Bangladesh is one of the world's largest recipients of remittances, which amount to a significant proportion of GDP. A substantial portion of these remittances is invested in children's education, financing school fees, coaching costs, books and materials, and in many cases the higher costs of private or English-medium schooling. Families with members working abroad are consistently found in research to invest more in

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children's education than comparable families without overseas workers, and the educational outcomes of children from remittance-receiving families are measurably better than those of comparable non-remittance families.

The educational dimension of the diaspora is not simply a financial one. Bangladeshis living abroad experience different educational systems and develop different conceptions of what education is and what it can do. The Bangladeshi parent living in the United Kingdom, whose child attends a British school, develops a comparative understanding of educational quality that shapes her aspirations and her advocacy when she returns to Bangladesh or maintains connections with the family at home. The Bangladeshi student who completes higher education in the United States or Australia returns (if she returns) with an experience of educational culture that is often dramatically different from what she experienced in Bangladesh, and this difference is itself a resource for educational reflection and reform.

9.2 The Rohingya Crisis and Its Educational Emergency

The influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, which accelerated dramatically in 2017 following military violence against the Rohingya community and has continued since, has created one of the world's largest refugee situations on Bangladesh's territory, centered on the camps of Cox's Bazar in the southeast of the country. By the early 2020s, the Cox's Bazar camps housed approximately one million Rohingya refugees, representing the world's largest refugee camp complex.

The educational situation of Rohingya children in Bangladesh is an emergency within an emergency. The Bangladesh government, for reasons of sovereignty and concern about permanence, has maintained a policy of not providing formal government school education to Rohingya children, and has restricted the Rohingya community from enrolling in formal educational institutions. This policy has meant that the education of Rohingya children has been provided almost entirely by international humanitarian organizations, primarily UNICEF, the UNHCR, various international NGOs, and local civil society organizations, through learning centers in the camps.

The humanitarian education provided in the camps has achieved significant reach, but the quality and adequacy of this education are seriously limited by the conditions of camp life. Learning centers are overcrowded, inadequately staffed, and operate in a context of psychological trauma, physical insecurity, and profound uncertainty about the future. The curriculum provided has been a Bangladeshi government-endorsed curriculum that does not prepare children for reintegration into Myanmar or for formal educational certification in either country. The situation of a generation of Rohingya children who are growing up without formal education, without educational credentials, and without clear educational pathways is one of the most serious humanitarian educational crises in Asia.

The sociological dimensions of the Rohingya educational crisis extend beyond the immediate humanitarian concern. The presence of more than one million refugees in a relatively small geographical area has significant effects on the local Bangladeshi community, including on the educational infrastructure and social services of Cox's Bazar district. The influx of humanitarian

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funding and NGO activity has created both economic opportunities and social tensions in the host community. The educational gap between Rohingya refugees, who lack access to formal education, and the local Bangladeshi community, which has access to government schools even if their quality is limited, is a source of social inequality that has significant implications for community relations and social stability.

9.3 Brain Drain, Brain Gain, and the International Circulation of Educational Human Capital

Bangladesh faces a significant and growing challenge of educational human capital loss through emigration. The most highly educated and skilled Bangladeshis, those who have invested most in their own human capital and who have been produced at the greatest cost to the public educational system, are also the most likely to emigrate to higher-income countries where they can earn substantially better salaries and enjoy better professional conditions.

The phenomenon of brain drain from Bangladesh is well-documented in the domains of medicine, engineering, information technology, and academic research. Bangladeshi doctors migrate in large numbers to the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Bangladeshi engineers find employment in construction projects across the Middle East and in technology companies globally. Bangladeshi IT professionals, whose skills have been developed through a combination of public university education and private training, are in increasing demand internationally. And Bangladeshi academics, trained through the public university system and often through internationally funded doctoral programs, frequently find employment in foreign universities where research conditions, salaries, and academic freedom are superior.

This brain drain has complex effects on Bangladesh's educational and economic development. On the one hand, it represents a loss of skilled human capital that Bangladesh's public education system has invested in producing. On the other hand, the diaspora of skilled Bangladeshis creates connections, networks, and knowledge flows that can benefit Bangladesh through remittances, knowledge transfer, advocacy, and eventually through return migration that brings enhanced skills and international perspectives.

The concept of "brain circulation" rather than brain drain is relevant here. Drawing on the work of researchers such as AnnaLee Saxenian and Devesh Kapur, who have studied the role of diaspora communities in economic development, it is possible to understand the migration of skilled Bangladeshis not simply as a loss but as the creation of a transnational educational and economic network that can be mobilized for development. The Bangladeshi diaspora in Silicon Valley, in London's financial district, in Toronto's medical establishment, and in academic institutions around the world, represents a resource of knowledge, connection, and influence that is, if anything, underutilized in Bangladesh's development strategy.

Chapter Ten: The Sociology of Educational Reform: Why Change is Hard

10.1 The Political Sociology of Reform Resistance

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Educational reform is everywhere difficult. But in Bangladesh, the difficulty of educational reform has some specific structural features that deserve careful sociological analysis. Understanding why reform is hard is an essential prerequisite to designing reforms that might actually succeed.

The political sociology of reform resistance in Bangladesh begins with the observation that the existing educational system, for all its failures, serves the interests of specific social groups who have the political power to resist changes that threaten those interests. The private coaching industry, which benefits from the inadequacy of classroom teaching and the dependence of examination performance on supplementary tutoring, has a direct economic interest in the maintenance of the examination-centered system. The teachers who supplement their incomes through private tutoring have a personal financial interest in a system that generates tutoring demand. The politicians who use teaching appointments as patronage resources have a political interest in the preservation of the patronage system. The officials who benefit from corruption in educational procurement have a direct financial interest in the maintenance of opacity and discretion in educational contracting. And the social elites who benefit from the class segregation of the educational system have an interest in the preservation of a system that ensures their children's competitive advantage.

These structural interests do not operate through crude and visible opposition to reform. They operate through the much more subtle and effective mechanisms of administrative delay, technical objection, selective implementation, and the gradual dilution of reform ambitions as they move from policy to practice. A ministerial announcement of curriculum reform is followed by a curriculum development process that is slow, under-resourced, and subject to the competing influences of various institutional actors. The new curriculum, when it is produced, is more conservative than the reform vision because the most radical elements have been modified in response to political pressure. The textbooks that are produced to implement the curriculum are produced under conditions of time pressure and procurement irregularity that compromise their quality. The teacher training provided to implement the new curriculum is inadequate in duration, depth, and geographical reach. And the assessment system, which is the most consequential point of implementation, is the site of the greatest resistance, because changes to assessment directly affect the competitive dynamics of social mobility.

This pattern, which the political scientist Albert Hirschman called "reform mongering" in a somewhat different context, is not unique to Bangladesh. It characterizes the implementation of educational reform in many developing countries. But the specific features of Bangladesh's political economy, including the high levels of political partisanship that shape all public institution, the weakness of bureaucratic autonomy and professional independence, and the limited capacity of civil society to hold the government accountable for educational outcomes, give this pattern particular power and persistence in Bangladesh.

10.2 The Bureaucratic Culture of Educational Administration

The culture of educational administration in Bangladesh is a significant and underanalyzed factor in the failure of educational reform. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Ministry of Education, along with their affiliated agencies including the National Curriculum and

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Textbook Board (NCTB), the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), and the various examination boards, constitute a large and complex bureaucratic apparatus whose culture and practices significantly shape what educational reform can achieve.

The dominant culture of this bureaucratic apparatus is one that was shaped by the colonial administrative tradition and that has been reinforced by decades of political interference and resource scarcity. Key features of this culture include: a strong emphasis on hierarchical authority and deference to superiors; a risk-averse orientation that rewards compliance with rules and punishes innovation that might fail; limited communication across departments and levels of the system; a tendency to measure institutional performance by inputs (funds spent, schools built, textbooks distributed) rather than outcomes (learning achieved, teachers developed); and a lack of systematic feedback mechanisms that might alert administrators to implementation failures and allow corrective action.

This bureaucratic culture creates a profound disconnect between policy aspiration and implementation reality. Educational policy in Bangladesh is often sophisticated in its aspirations and thoughtful in its design, reflecting the input of competent educational experts and the influence of international best practice. But the implementation of policy happens through a bureaucratic system whose culture is poorly equipped to translate sophisticated policy intentions into genuine improvement of practice at the classroom level. The result is what researchers have called "policy implementation gap": the systematic difference between what policy documents promise and what actually happens in classrooms.

10.3 The Role of Civil Society in Educational Change

Civil society, broadly defined to include non-governmental organizations, professional associations, academic institutions, media organizations, and community groups, plays a significant and growing role in Bangladesh's educational landscape. The most famous example is BRAC, which has developed one of the world's most innovative and effective non-formal education systems and which has extended its work to formal education reform through research, advocacy, and program implementation. But BRAC is not alone. A rich ecosystem of civil society organizations, from the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) to the Research and Evaluation Division of BRAC to the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, has developed over the past decades a significant capacity for educational research, advocacy, and innovation.

Civil society organizations have played several important roles in Bangladesh's educational development. They have filled gaps in public provision, particularly for the most marginalized populations. They have piloted innovative models that have subsequently influenced public system reform. They have conducted and published research that holds the public system accountable and provides evidence for reform advocacy. And they have connected Bangladesh's educational reform efforts with international networks of knowledge and resources.

The relationship between civil society and the state in the educational domain is complex and sometimes tense. Under certain governments, particularly under regimes that have tolerated

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political pluralism, civil society organizations have had significant influence on educational policy. Under more authoritarian governments, civil society space has been more restricted, and organizations that have been critical of official educational policy have faced harassment or resource constraints. The post-2024 political transition, with its commitment to a more open political environment, has created new opportunities for civil society engagement in educational policy, though it has also created new uncertainties about the direction and stability of the political landscape.

10.4 International Organizations and the Paradox of Educational Aid

The role of international development organizations in Bangladesh's education system is enormous, consequential, and philosophically complex. The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Global Partnership for Education, the Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), and numerous bilateral and multilateral donors have all invested substantially in Bangladesh's educational system over the past decades. This international investment has financed much of the infrastructure expansion of the system, contributed to curriculum and teacher training reform, and provided the technical assistance through which international best practice has been introduced into Bangladeshi educational policy discourse.

The positive contributions of international educational aid to Bangladesh are real and significant. The Female Secondary School Assistance Program, one of the most successful educational interventions in the developing world, was financed with World Bank support. The various Primary Education Development Programs have been financed through pooled international funding. The development of the National Curriculum Framework and the 2023 curriculum reform have benefited from international technical assistance and research.

But the political economy of international educational aid creates its own distortions and problems that deserve critical analysis. International donors have their own institutional interests, political priorities, and theoretical commitments that shape the reforms they support and the conditions they attach to their support. The human capital theory that has dominated World Bank educational lending since the 1980s has led to a consistent emphasis on measurable outcomes, standardized testing, and the economic returns to education that may not always align with the broader educational values of Bangladesh's communities. The international aid community's enthusiasm for particular reform models, whether it is communicative language teaching, school-based management, or competency-based curriculum reform, can create pressures for reform adoption that outrun the domestic capacity to implement those reforms effectively.

The concept of "educational aid dependence" is relevant here. Bangladesh's educational system has in certain respects become dependent on international aid for both financial resources and reform ideas, creating a relationship of asymmetric power in which the terms of educational reform are partly determined by donor institutions rather than by domestic democratic processes. This dependence is not simply financial. It is intellectual: the educated elite of educational

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administrators and reformers who interact with international organizations adopt the conceptual frameworks and analytical tools of those organizations, which then become the dominant language of educational policy discourse, potentially displacing indigenous frameworks and analytical traditions.

Chapter Eleven: Indigenous Communities, Ethnicity, and Educational Marginalization

11.1 The Indigenous Communities of Bangladesh: A Demographic Overview

Bangladesh is often described, both domestically and internationally, as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation of Bengali-speaking Muslims. This description, while capturing an important demographic reality, significantly obscures the presence and the educational situation of the country's indigenous ethnic communities, whose members number approximately one to two million people depending on the criteria of classification used and who constitute approximately one to one and a half percent of the national population.

The indigenous communities of Bangladesh are concentrated in two main geographical areas. The first is the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the southeast of the country, a mountainous and forested region bordering Myanmar and India that is home to approximately thirteen distinct ethnic groups, including the Chakma, Marma, Tripura (or Tipra), Mro, Tanchangya, Khumi, Khyang, Lusai, Bawm, Pangkhua, and Chak peoples. The second area of indigenous concentration is the plains regions, including the Barind Tract of Rajshahi and Dinajpur districts, where Santal, Munda, Oraon, and Mahali communities live, and the Sylhet and Mymensingh districts, where Garo, Khasi, Manipuri, and Bishnupriya communities are found.

The educational situation of these communities is, in aggregate, significantly worse than the national average on virtually every indicator. Enrollment rates are lower. Dropout rates are higher. Learning outcomes are below national averages. Literacy rates are lower. The proportion of young people completing secondary education is substantially lower than the national average. And the proportion reaching higher education is minimal.

11.2 The Political History of Indigenous Education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

The educational history of the Chittagong Hill Tracts cannot be understood without reference to the political history of the region, which is one of the most contested and traumatic in Bangladesh's post-independence experience. The insurgency that began in the 1970s, driven by the indigenous communities' resistance to Bengali settler migration into the CHT, the assertion of Bengali cultural and political authority over the region, and the military's counterinsurgency campaign, created conditions of intense conflict that severely disrupted educational provision in the region for two decades.

The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, signed between the government of Sheikh Hasina and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS), committed the government to a range of measures aimed at restoring normalcy in the region, including in the educational

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domain. The accord recognized the right of indigenous children to receive primary education in their mother tongue, a commitment that has been partially implemented through the mother-tongue-based multilingual education program launched in 2010.

The implementation of the peace accord's educational commitments has been incomplete and contested. The mother-tongue education program, which initially covered only a small number of schools in a limited number of indigenous languages, has expanded gradually but remains a pilot program rather than a comprehensive policy. The textbooks developed for the program, written in Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo, Sadri, Mro, and Tanchangya using modified Bengali script, represent a significant achievement but have faced challenges of teacher availability, material distribution, and quality control.

Beyond the mother-tongue education program, the CHT's educational institutions face the challenges of geographical remoteness, inadequate infrastructure, and the continued underrepresentation of indigenous community members in the teaching workforce and educational administration. The school curriculum, beyond the mother-tongue program, remains oriented toward the national Bengali curriculum and reflects the cultural assumptions of the Bengali-speaking majority rather than the cultural realities of indigenous communities.

11.3 The Rights-Based Framework for Indigenous Education

The educational rights of indigenous peoples are recognized in international law and in international educational standards. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007, affirms the right of indigenous peoples to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. The International Labour Organization's Convention 169, while not ratified by Bangladesh, establishes comparable standards. UNESCO's Education for All and Sustainable Development Goal 4 explicitly include indigenous peoples as groups requiring specific attention to ensure equitable access to quality education.

Bangladesh's obligations under international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which Bangladesh has ratified, include obligations to provide education without discrimination based on ethnicity, language, or religion. The persistent educational disadvantage of indigenous communities in Bangladesh raises serious questions about compliance with these obligations, questions that have been raised by UN treaty bodies in the course of their periodic reviews of Bangladesh's human rights performance.

The rights-based framework for indigenous education is not merely a legal matter. It reflects a deep philosophical commitment to the value of cultural diversity and to the right of all communities to transmit their cultures, languages, and values to their children through the medium of education. A national educational system that is organized exclusively around the cultural assumptions and the language of the dominant ethnic group is not simply administratively convenient. It is a form of cultural violence against minority communities, an

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assertion that their cultures and languages are educationally worthless, that is philosophically indefensible and practically damaging to the educational development of indigenous children.

11.4 Ethnicity, Identity, and Educational Achievement: A Comparative Analysis

The relationship between ethnic identity and educational achievement in Bangladesh is mediated by multiple factors that require careful disaggregation. Ethnic identity is correlated with geographical location (indigenous communities are concentrated in remote and underserved areas), with economic marginalization (indigenous communities are disproportionately poor), with linguistic difference (indigenous languages are different from the medium of instruction), and with political marginalization (indigenous communities have limited representation in the political institutions that determine educational policy). Any analysis of the educational disadvantage of indigenous communities must disentangle these correlated factors to identify the specific contribution of each.

Research in this area, while limited by the small population size of individual indigenous communities, consistently finds that even after controlling for economic marginalization and geographical remoteness, indigenous children underperform relative to Bengali children in the national education system. This "ethnic achievement gap" over and above economic and geographical disadvantage is attributable to the additional barriers that linguistic difference, cultural mismatch, and social discrimination create for indigenous students in a system organized around the Bengali majority.

The comparative dimension is instructive. Countries with well-developed policies of bilingual and multilingual education, including certain states of India (particularly Kerala and some northeastern states), the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and Bolivia, have shown that the educational disadvantage of indigenous communities can be substantially reduced, though not eliminated, through the provision of mother-tongue-based multilingual education in the early years of schooling combined with effective transition to the dominant national language. These comparative examples provide an evidence base for the kind of educational reform that would most significantly improve the educational outcomes of Bangladesh's indigenous communities.

Conclusion to Part Two: The Social Architecture of an Educational System in Transformation

The sociology and anthropology of education in Bangladesh reveal a system embedded in a specific social world whose complex dynamics cannot be reduced to administrative arrangements, curriculum content, or pedagogical technique. The educational system of Bangladesh is shaped by the class structure of Bangladeshi society, by the language politics of a nation born from a language movement, by the gender dynamics of a patriarchal society in rapid transformation, by the religious pluralism of a Muslim-majority country with multiple Islamic traditions and a significant non-Muslim minority, by the geographical diversity of a country that stretches from mountain forests to river deltas, by the professional culture of a teaching workforce shaped by inadequate training and weak accountability, by the psychological weight

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of an examination culture that organizes the emotional life of millions of families, by the transnational connections of a diaspora that reaches from the Gulf states to the global cities of the West, by the contested dynamics of reform in a politicized institutional environment, and by the specific vulnerabilities of indigenous communities whose cultural distinctiveness places them at the margins of a system designed for the majority.

Each of these dimensions intersects with the others in ways that produce the complex, contradictory, and often paradoxical reality of Bangladeshi education. Gender parity in enrollment coexists with persistent gender inequality in quality and outcomes. Remarkable expansion of access coexists with a deep and worsening learning crisis. Sophisticated curriculum reform aspirations coexist with bureaucratic cultures that consistently dilute reform in implementation. High educational aspiration coexists with massive private investment in examination coaching that makes aspiration dependent on wealth. Rich indigenous cultural diversity coexists with an educational system that treats Bengali culture as the only culture worthy of educational expression.

Understanding this complexity is not an exercise in academic curiosity. It is a precondition for meaningful reform. Educational reformers who do not understand the social architecture of the system they are seeking to reform, who treat it as a technical problem of curriculum design or teacher training rather than as a social and political problem embedded in specific histories and power relations, will consistently fail to produce the transformation they seek. The children of Bangladesh deserve reformers who are sociologically and anthropologically informed, who understand the system they are working within, and who have the political intelligence and the institutional imagination to work with the grain of social reality rather than simply against it.

Part Two has provided the foundations for this sociological and anthropological understanding. Part Three will turn to the detailed political history of education in Bangladesh, examining how political forces have shaped the educational system decade by decade since independence, and how the political dynamics of the present are reshaping the possibilities of the future. The sociological analysis of Part Two will inform the political analysis of Part Three, because politics does not operate in a social vacuum. It is itself a social practice, embedded in the class structures, gender relations, religious identities, and cultural frameworks that this Part has mapped.

The threads that connect sociology to politics, culture to policy, classroom practice to national development, will run through all the remaining parts of this work, which together aspire to provide a comprehensive critical commentary adequate to the complexity of one of the world's most challenging and most fascinating educational systems.

Supplementary Commentary: Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application to Bangladeshi Educational Reality

A Note on Theory and Method

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Throughout Part Two, we have drawn on a range of theoretical frameworks from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, political economy, and educational theory. It is appropriate, in conclusion, to reflect briefly on the relationship between theory and the empirical reality of Bangladeshi education, and to note some of the theoretical developments of the past decade that are most relevant to this analysis.

The Bourdieusian framework of social reproduction has been the central organizing theory of Chapter One, and its application to Bangladesh illuminates structural features of the educational system that more descriptive approaches tend to miss. But Bourdieu's framework, developed primarily in the context of French society, requires adaptation to the Bangladeshi context. The concept of cultural capital works somewhat differently in a society where the dominant cultural capital is not the sophisticated cultural consumption of the French bourgeoisie but rather a particular form of English-language competence and the cultural codes of modern professional life. And the concept of the educational field as a relatively autonomous social field, while analytically useful, is complicated in Bangladesh by the deep penetration of political forces into educational institutions that makes the educational field far less autonomous than Bourdieu's theory assumes.

The capabilities approach, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, provides an alternative and complementary theoretical framework that has become increasingly influential in development and education scholarship since the 2010s. The capabilities approach evaluates educational systems not by their outputs in terms of credentials or economic returns but by their contribution to the development of human capabilities, the real freedoms and opportunities that enable people to live flourishing human lives. Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities, including bodily health, bodily integrity, the use of senses and imagination, emotional development, practical reason, affiliation, play, and control over one's political and material environment, provides a richer and more humanistic standard for evaluating educational systems than either economic productivity or examination performance.

Applied to Bangladesh, the capabilities approach asks not merely how many students are enrolled or what percentage passes the SSC examination, but what real freedoms and opportunities the educational system provides or fails to provide for students of different classes, genders, regions, and ethnic backgrounds. This question, taken seriously, reveals failures of the educational system that aggregate enrollment and examination statistics obscure, and it points toward a richer conception of educational success than the dominant economistic framework provides.

The decolonial educational theory that has developed rapidly in the 2010s and 2020s, associated with scholars such as Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Catherine Walsh, offers another important theoretical resource for understanding Bangladesh's educational system. Decolonial theory draws attention to the ways in which colonial structures of knowledge, authority, and value persist in postcolonial educational systems, shaping the curriculum, the language of instruction, the pedagogical relations, and the criteria of educational success in ways that reflect colonial rather than indigenous epistemological frameworks.

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The relevance of this framework to Bangladesh is immediate. The colonial educational legacy, including the English-medium elite track, the examination system, the hierarchical pedagogical culture, and the privileging of certain forms of knowledge over others, is visible throughout the educational system and in the sociological analysis of Part Two. But the decolonial framework must be applied with care, because the post-colonial national educational system in Bangladesh has not simply reproduced colonial structures. It has transformed them in complex ways, adding Bengali nationalist layers, Islamic cultural elements, and progressivist reform aspirations that make the system a genuinely hybrid formation rather than a simple replication of colonial education.

The most productive theoretical approach, in the view of the authors of this commentary, is one that draws selectively and critically on multiple theoretical frameworks, using each to illuminate aspects of the educational reality that others may obscure, while remaining firmly grounded in the specific historical, political, and cultural conditions of Bangladesh. Educational theory is a tool for understanding, not a doctrinal system to be applied without reference to context. The complexity of Bangladesh's educational system demands theoretical sophistication and empirical rigor in equal measure.

Recent Theoretical Developments: 2024-2026

The years since 2024 have seen several significant theoretical developments in the fields relevant to this analysis that deserve mention. In the sociology of education, the ongoing development of what has been called "relational sociology," associated with scholars such as Mustafa Emirbayer and building on the Bourdieusian tradition, has produced new conceptual tools for analyzing educational systems as dynamic fields of social relations rather than static institutional structures. This relational approach is particularly relevant to understanding how educational reform processes unfold in politically contested environments such as Bangladesh's.

In educational psychology, the consolidation of "cognitive load theory" and its elaboration by scholars including John Sweller, Fred Paas, and Jeroen van Merrienboer has produced increasingly sophisticated accounts of the conditions under which effective learning occurs, accounts that have direct implications for curriculum design and pedagogical practice. The application of these insights to the specific challenge of improving learning outcomes in low-resource, high-density classroom environments is an active and promising research frontier. Several Bangladeshi researchers, working in collaboration with international partners, have begun to apply cognitive load theory insights to the design of classroom materials and teaching strategies for the specific conditions of Bangladeshi government schools.

In the field of multilingual education, the consolidation of translanguaging theory, associated with scholars such as Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei, has produced new frameworks for understanding and supporting the linguistic experiences of children who navigate multiple languages in their daily lives. Translanguaging theory challenges the assumption that languages are separate systems that should be kept separate in educational contexts, arguing instead that multilingual individuals draw fluidly on their entire linguistic repertoire and that educational approaches that acknowledge and build on this fluid multilingualism are more effective than approaches that rigidly separate languages. The implications of translanguaging theory for the education of

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indigenous children in Bangladesh, who navigate between their home language, standard Bengali, and sometimes English or Arabic in their educational lives, are potentially significant.

In the political economy of education, the debate about the relationship between educational inequality and economic inequality has intensified, driven in part by the growing recognition of extreme wealth concentration globally and its implications for educational opportunity. Research by economists such as Gregory Mankiw, Raj Chetty, and their collaborators has documented the increasingly strong correlation between family income and educational opportunity in both developed and developing countries, providing empirical grounding for the Bourdieusian theoretical account of educational reproduction. In Bangladesh, where wealth inequality has grown significantly during the high growth period of the past two decades, this research adds an important economic dimension to the sociological analysis of educational stratification.

The Examination of Administrative Jurisprudence in Educational Governance

One aspect of Bangladesh's educational system that requires more analytical attention than it typically receives is the administrative law dimension of educational governance. The relationship between the formal legal framework and the actual governance of educational institutions is mediated by a complex body of administrative rules, regulations, circulars, and judicial decisions that constitute what might be called the administrative jurisprudence of education in Bangladesh.

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Ministry of Education have issued thousands of administrative orders, guidelines, and circulars over the decades since independence, creating a dense regulatory environment within which educational institutions operate. Many of these regulations are contradictory, outdated, or simply unenforced. The absence of a systematic process of legal consolidation and review means that the regulatory environment of education is genuinely opaque to many practitioners, who navigate it through experience and local knowledge rather than through formal legal understanding.

The judicial dimension of educational governance has grown in importance in recent decades, as citizens and civil society organizations have increasingly turned to the courts to challenge government educational decisions. The High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh has issued important decisions on a range of educational matters, including the legality of corporal punishment (declared unconstitutional in 2011), the rights of madrasa students to government support, the admission processes of public universities, and the rights of disabled students to reasonable accommodation in educational institutions. These judicial decisions represent an important and underanalyzed dimension of educational governance, one that connects the formal legal system with the practical operation of educational institutions.

The development of what the legal scholar Octavio Ferraz has called "transformative constitutionalism," the use of constitutional and administrative law to advance the substantive rights of marginalized groups, is relevant to the educational context in Bangladesh. The Supreme Court's proactive role in protecting educational rights, seen in the corporal punishment decision and in decisions on university admissions, suggests a potential for judicial review to complement and sometimes catalyze executive and legislative action in the educational domain. The

conditions under which this judicial activism is productive rather than counterproductive, and the limits of legal remedies for educational problems that are fundamentally sociological and political in character, are important questions for the ongoing development of educational governance in Bangladesh.

The Presidential and Political Dimensions of Educational Leadership

The educational policies of Bangladesh cannot be adequately understood without understanding the relationship between the highest levels of political power and the direction of educational change. In Bangladesh's parliamentary system, the Prime Minister is the most powerful executive actor, and the educational priorities of successive Prime Ministers have decisively shaped the direction of educational policy. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's commitment to universal and secular education in the immediate post-independence period set the philosophical direction of the general education system. Ziaur Rahman's incorporation of Islamic elements into the educational framework and his development of the Madrasa system changed that direction significantly. Hussain Muhammad Ershad's constitutionalization of Islam as the state religion and his patronage of Islamic educational institutions further embedded religious considerations in the educational policy framework. Sheikh Hasina's Digital Bangladesh vision and the 2023 curriculum reform represented the most ambitious attempt since independence to reorient the educational system toward a modernizing, technology-oriented vision of development.

The relationship between political leadership and educational direction is not simply one of top-down command. It is a complex interaction in which political leaders respond to social pressures, interest group demands, international influences, and the strategic calculations of electoral politics, while also seeking to reshape the educational system in directions that reflect their own values and visions. The educational legacy of each political period in Bangladesh's history is a product of these complex interactions, not of the unmediated imposition of any single leader's educational philosophy.

The post-2024 political transition, with the departure of Sheikh Hasina and the eventual assumption of power by a BNP-led government, creates a new and still-evolving political context for educational policy. The BNP's stated educational commitments, analyzed in Part One, represent a specific political vision of educational transformation that differs in important respects from the Awami League vision it replaces. The translation of these political commitments into actual educational change will be determined by the same complex of political, bureaucratic, and social forces that has shaped educational reform throughout Bangladesh's history.

Understanding this political dimension of educational governance is not merely an academic exercise. It is essential for anyone who seeks to contribute to educational improvement in Bangladesh, whether as a policymaker, an educator, a civil society activist, or a researcher. Educational change happens in political space, and those who seek to promote educational improvement must be politically intelligent as well as educationally informed.

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Postscript: Toward a Synthesis

Part Two has examined the sociology and anthropology of Bangladesh's educational system across eleven chapters, analyzing the dimensions of class, culture, language, gender, religion, geography, professional identity, examination culture, migration, reform dynamics, and indigenous educational rights. Each of these dimensions has revealed specific features of the educational system's organization and operation that a purely structural or philosophical analysis would miss.

The sociological and anthropological perspectives developed in this Part will inform all the subsequent Parts of this commentary. Part Three's analysis of the political history of education will draw on the class analysis, the religious sociology, and the institutional analysis developed here. Part Four's examination of curriculum and assessment will be informed by the anthropological analysis of examination culture and the hidden curriculum. Part Five's focus on teacher education will draw on the analysis of professional culture and identity. Part Six's treatment of higher education will extend the class analysis and the critique of institutional decay. Parts Seven and Eight on technical education and non-formal education will be informed by the analysis of educational aspiration and social class. Part Nine's comparative analysis will use the sociological frameworks developed here to generate productive comparisons with other national contexts. And Part Ten's synthesis and recommendations will draw on the full sociological picture to propose reforms that are grounded in a realistic understanding of the social world within which the educational system operates.

The aspiration of this commentary is not simply analytical. It is normative. A deep understanding of the sociology and anthropology of Bangladesh's educational system should produce not only knowledge but commitment: commitment to the transformation of an educational system that currently serves some of Bangladesh's children well and many of its children poorly, and whose failures fall most heavily on those who are already most disadvantaged. The children of Bangladesh's chars and hill tracts, of its garment worker families, of its indigenous communities, of its Qawmi Madrasa students who lack pathways to modern professional life, of its girls who face barriers to secondary and higher education, and of its rural poor who attend overcrowded schools with undertrained teachers, deserve an education system that genuinely serves their development, their dignity, and their aspiration.

This is not merely a developmental aspiration. It is a philosophical and moral imperative. The right to education, established in the Constitution of Bangladesh, in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Bangladesh in 1990), and in the broader framework of international human rights law, is not only a right to enrollment. It is a right to education of quality adequate to the development of every child's full human potential. By this standard, Bangladesh's educational system falls systematically and seriously short, and the sociological and anthropological analysis of this Part has illuminated the structural reasons for that shortfall.

The remaining eight Parts of this commentary will build on this foundation, deepening the analysis and working toward a comprehensive understanding that can serve as a basis for the informed and committed reform effort that Bangladesh's children deserve.

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PART THREE: THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH, 1971 TO THE PRESENT

Power, Ideology, and the Contested Architecture of a National Education System

Prologue to Part Three: Politics as Educational Destiny

There is a proposition, widely held among educational technocrats and international development specialists, that education is fundamentally a technical enterprise. In this view, the problems of an educational system are problems of method, management, and resource allocation, and their solutions are correspondingly technical: better curriculum design, improved teacher training, more efficient use of educational budgets, stronger accountability mechanisms. Politics, in this technocratic vision, is at best an enabling condition for good educational management and at worst a distorting interference with it.

This proposition is false, and nowhere is its falsity more visible than in Bangladesh. The educational system of Bangladesh is not a technical apparatus that has been periodically distorted by political interference. It is, in its fundamental structure and orientation, a political creation. Its three-stream architecture, its language policy, its examination system, its relationship with religious educational institutions, its budget priorities, its governance arrangements, and the content of its textbooks have all been shaped, reshaped, and sometimes fundamentally transformed by the political choices of successive governments. To understand Bangladesh's educational system is to understand its political history, and to propose educational reform is to engage in political analysis.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is a counsel of realism. Educational reformers who understand that they are working in political space, who can read the specific political dynamics of their moment, and who can build the coalitions and generate the political will that educational transformation requires, are far more likely to succeed than those who imagine that good technical proposals will implement themselves if only the evidence is sufficiently compelling. The history of educational reform in Bangladesh is, among other things, a history of technically sound proposals that failed because their proponents did not adequately understand or manage the political conditions of their implementation.

Part Three traces the political history of education in Bangladesh from the moment of independence in 1971 to the complex and still-evolving present of 2026. It examines, in roughly chronological order, the educational policies and their political contexts across the periods of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government (1972-1975), the succession of military governments under Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990), the democratic transition and the governments of the 1990s and 2000s under alternating BNP and Awami League administrations, Sheikh Hasina's long period of governance (2009-2024), the student

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revolution of 2024, the interim government under Muhammad Yunus, and the emerging political landscape of 2025 and 2026.

Throughout this narrative, the analysis engages with the philosophical and ideological dimensions of educational politics, the legal and constitutional framework within which educational policy operates, the specific role of presidential and prime ministerial leadership in shaping educational direction, the influence of international political economy on domestic educational choices, and the political sociology of educational interest groups. The result, it is hoped, is a political history that is also an educational analysis: a history that illuminates not merely what happened but why, and not merely why but with what consequences for the millions of children whose educational lives were shaped by these political decisions.

Chapter One: Independence and Aspiration: The Educational Vision of the Founding Republic, 1971 to 1975

1.1 The Weight of the Beginning: Education in the Context of Liberation

The founding of Bangladesh in 1971 was an act of extraordinary political and human significance. The nine months of the Liberation War (Muktijuddho), which ended with the surrender of Pakistani forces on December 16, 1971, created a new nation from the ruins of a devastating conflict in which hundreds of thousands were killed, millions were displaced, and the social and institutional fabric of what had been East Pakistan was badly damaged. The educational system was no exception: schools and colleges had been targeted in the violence, teachers had been killed or displaced, the nine-month school calendar had been completely disrupted, and the Pakistani administrative and institutional framework within which education had operated had collapsed.

The first task of educational reconstruction was therefore quite literally physical: reopening schools, restoring the calendar, providing the institutional structure within which children could return to the classroom. This physical reconstruction was accomplished with remarkable speed, a testament to both the organizational capacity of the new government and the determination of communities across the country to restore normal life. Schools reopened across Bangladesh within weeks of the end of the Liberation War, and by early 1972 the educational system was operating, if imperfectly, across the country.

But the more fundamental task was philosophical and political: what kind of educational system should Bangladesh build? The new republic was committed by its founding ideology to a set of principles, encapsulated in the four pillars of the 1972 Constitution: nationalism (Jatiyo Chetana), socialism (Samajbad), democracy (Ganatantra), and secularism (Dharmanirpekshata). These four principles were not merely political slogans. They represented a substantive vision of the society that Bangladesh aimed to become, and they had direct implications for the design of the educational system.

1.2 The Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission and the Vision of Educational Nationalism

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The most important document in Bangladesh's early educational history is the report of the National Education Commission of 1972, chaired by the eminent physicist and educationist Dr. Muhammad Qudrat-e-Khuda. The Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission was established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government within months of independence, reflecting the new government's recognition that educational reform was a matter of urgent national priority. Its mandate was comprehensive: to examine the entire educational system inherited from the Pakistani period and to recommend a new framework adequate to the needs and aspirations of the new republic.

The Commission's report, submitted in 1974, is a landmark document in Bangladeshi educational history. It is also a document of considerable philosophical sophistication, reflecting serious engagement with the fundamental questions of educational purpose and design. Several of its key recommendations deserve detailed analysis.

The most fundamental recommendation of the Qudrat-e-Khuda report was the adoption of Bengali as the sole medium of instruction at all levels of the educational system, including higher education. This recommendation was both a philosophical commitment to linguistic nationalism and a practical proposal for the democratization of education. The Commission argued that the colonial legacy of English-medium higher education had created a deep social divide between the small English-educated elite and the Bengali-speaking majority, and that the establishment of Bengali as the medium of all education was essential to the creation of a genuinely democratic and nationally integrated educational system.

The Commission also recommended the nationalization of primary education, the expansion of universal primary schooling, the reform of the examination system to reduce rote memorization and promote critical thinking, the integration of education with the productive activities of the community through vocational and technical education, and the reform of the Madrasa system to incorporate secular subjects and bring it closer to the general education stream. These recommendations, taken together, represented a comprehensive progressive vision of educational transformation that was explicitly connected to the secular, socialist, and democratic ideology of the founding republic.

The philosophical underpinning of the Qudrat-e-Khuda vision was a form of educational nationalism that drew on the Tagoreian tradition of rooted cultural education, on the socialist educational traditions of the Soviet Union and China (which had significant influence on left-leaning intellectual circles in Bangladesh in the 1970s), and on the progressive educational theory associated with Dewey and his successors. The Commission envisioned an educational system that would produce citizens of a particular kind: patriotic Bangladeshis who were proud of their Bengali cultural heritage, committed to the building of a democratic and just society, capable of contributing to economic development through technical and vocational competence, and free from the intellectual colonialism of an education organized around foreign languages and foreign cultural standards.

1.3 From Vision to (Non-)Implementation: The Political Economy of the 1970s

The Qudrat-e-Khuda report was warmly received by the government and the progressive intelligentsia. Its implementation was another matter entirely. Between the submission of the

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report in 1974 and the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975, the educational reforms recommended by the Commission were only partially implemented. Several structural reasons account for this gap between vision and implementation.

First, the economic crisis of the early 1970s severely constrained the resources available for educational investment. Bangladesh in 1972 was among the poorest countries in the world, devastated by the Liberation War and facing a massive humanitarian and reconstruction challenge. The government's revenues were minimal, international aid was not yet flowing in sufficient quantities, and the competition for scarce resources was intense across all sectors of public policy. The ambitious educational transformation envisaged by the Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission required substantial investment in new school buildings, trained teachers, revised curriculum and textbooks, and reformed administrative systems, and the resources for this investment were simply not available.

Second, the administrative capacity of the new government was severely limited. Bangladesh had few experienced civil servants, few trained educational administrators, and few institutions with the capacity to design, manage, and implement large-scale educational reform. The best-educated and most experienced Bengali administrators, who might have provided the administrative capacity for reform, were a small group whose members were divided among the numerous demands of building a new state from scratch. The capacity constraints were, if anything, even more binding than the resource constraints.

Third, the political environment of the early 1970s was one of intense social conflict and institutional instability that was not conducive to sustained educational reform. The constitutional crisis of 1974, the declaration of a state of emergency in December 1974, the shift from parliamentary to presidential government, and the escalating political violence that culminated in the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 created a political environment of crisis and instability in which educational reform was not the priority that the founding rhetoric had suggested.

The tragedy of this period is that the most philosophically coherent educational vision in Bangladesh's history was also the one that was most thoroughly unrealized. The Qudrat-e-Khuda report remains a document that is more cited than implemented, a blueprint for an educational transformation that Bangladesh has never quite achieved and that continues to cast a long shadow over subsequent reform debates.

1.4 The Constitutional Framework of Education: 1972 and Its Legacy

The Constitution of Bangladesh, adopted in 1972, established the legal framework within which education would operate. Article 17 of the original Constitution is particularly significant. It imposed a duty upon the state to adopt effective measures for the purpose of establishing a uniform, mass-oriented, and universal system of education; extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law; removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law; and relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs.

This constitutional provision established several important principles: universality (education for all), uniformity (a single national system rather than multiple parallel systems), free provision (the state's financial responsibility for education), and social orientation (education in service of the community and the nation). These principles were philosophically consistent with the founding ideology of the new republic: they were egalitarian, nationalist, and developmental in their orientation.

But the constitutional provision also contained within it a tension that would become increasingly apparent over the subsequent decades: the tension between the ideal of a uniform national educational system and the reality of a diverse, multi-stream educational landscape. The vision of a single uniform system was incompatible with the existence of the Madrasa stream, the English-medium stream, and the general Bengali-medium stream, each organized around different philosophical principles and serving different social communities. The constitutional commitment to uniformity was, in practice, never implemented, and the multi-stream system that existed before independence continued after it.

The jurisprudential analysis of Article 17 and its implementation (or non-implementation) is instructive. The courts of Bangladesh have periodically been asked to enforce the constitutional provisions on education, most significantly in cases concerning the right to free primary education and the right to non-discriminatory access to educational institutions. The Supreme Court has in various decisions affirmed the justiciability of these constitutional provisions, while acknowledging the limits of judicial enforcement in the face of resource constraints and political resistance. The relationship between the constitutional text, the judicial interpretation, and the administrative reality of educational provision in Bangladesh represents one of the most significant gaps in the country's constitutional practice.

Chapter Two: The Military Turn and the Islamic Reorientation: Education Under Ziaur Rahman, 1975 to 1981

2.1 The Coup, the Counter-Coup, and the Remaking of Bangladesh

The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family on August 15, 1975, was followed by a period of intense political turbulence including a series of coups and counter-coups that eventually brought Major General Ziaur Rahman to power. Ziaur Rahman, initially as Chief Martial Law Administrator and from 1977 as President of Bangladesh, would govern the country until his own assassination in May 1981. His period in power was one of significant institutional and ideological reorientation that had profound implications for the educational system.

The Ziaur Rahman period represented a deliberate effort to redefine the ideological foundations of the Bangladeshi state, and therefore of the educational system, away from the secular Bengali nationalism of the founding period and toward a synthesis of Bengali cultural identity and Islamic religious identity. This reorientation was expressed in a series of constitutional amendments that modified the founding four pillars of the 1972 Constitution. The principle of secularism was replaced by the declaration that "absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah

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shall be the basis of all actions." The word "Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Rahim" was added to the preamble of the Constitution. And Bangladesh was replaced in official usage by the phrase "Bangladeshi nationalism," a political concept that explicitly incorporated Islamic identity as a component of national belonging in a way that the Bengali nationalism of the independence period had not.

2.2 Educational Policy as Ideological Reconstruction

The ideological reorientation of the Ziaur Rahman period was reflected directly in educational policy in several important ways. The Madrasa system, which had been a concern rather than a priority for the Mujib government, became an object of active policy promotion. The Aliya Madrasa system was significantly expanded, with new Madrasas established across the country and government funding for existing Madrasas increased. Teacher salaries in Madrasa institutions were brought closer to parity with those in the general system. The curriculum of the Aliya Madrasas was modified to incorporate more Islamic content and to strengthen the religious character of the education provided.

The textbooks of the general education system were also modified to reflect the new ideological orientation. References to secularism as a founding principle of Bangladesh were removed or minimized. Religious content was incorporated into moral education and social studies texts. The framing of Bangladeshi national identity shifted from the Bengali cultural nationalism of the Mujib period to the Islamic Bengali nationalism of the Zia period. These textbook changes were significant because textbooks in Bangladesh are produced centrally by the NCTB and distributed nationally, meaning that changes in textbook content represent changes in the official ideological content of the entire national education system.

The educational philosophy of the Zia period was not simply reactive against the Mujib period. It reflected a genuine ideological vision of Bangladesh as a Muslim nation whose educational system should express and reinforce Islamic values alongside Bengali cultural identity. This vision had real popular resonance: the majority of Bangladesh's population is Muslim, and many Bangladeshis felt that the secular Bengali nationalism of the independence period had undervalued or marginalized their Islamic identity. The Zia period's incorporation of Islamic identity into the national educational framework was, in this sense, a response to a real social aspiration that the Mujib period had inadequately acknowledged.

2.3 The National Education Commission of 1978 and the Shift of Priorities

The Ziaur Rahman government established its own National Education Commission in 1978, chaired by the educationist Dr. Mofizuddin Ahmed. The Mofizuddin Commission's report, submitted in 1979, reflected the changed ideological climate of the Zia period in several respects. Unlike the Qudrat-e-Khuda report, which had emphasized secularism, socialism, and Bengali nationalism, the Mofizuddin report gave much greater prominence to Islamic values as a component of educational purpose. It recommended the expansion of Islamic education across the general curriculum, the strengthening of the Madrasa system, and the incorporation of the work ethic and moral values associated with Islamic teaching into the broader educational enterprise.

The Mofizuddin report also reflected the changed economic philosophy of the Zia period. Whereas the Qudrat-e-Khuda commission had operated within a broadly socialist developmental framework, the Mofizuddin commission operated within a framework that was more hospitable to private enterprise and market mechanisms. The report was more open to private educational provision, including private English-medium schools, than the earlier commission had been. This openness reflected the broader shift in Bangladesh's economic policy from the socialist orientation of the Mujib period toward a more market-friendly approach that would accelerate significantly under Ershad and the subsequent civilian governments.

The Mofizuddin report's recommendations on Madrasa education were particularly consequential. It recommended a comprehensive reform and expansion of the Aliya Madrasa system, bringing it fully within the government's educational framework while preserving its Islamic character. This recommendation was substantially implemented during the Zia and Ershad periods, contributing to the significant expansion of the Aliya system that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s.

2.4 The Political Sociology of the Islamic Educational Turn

The Islamic reorientation of education under Ziaur Rahman reflected a specific political sociology that is important to understand. The Ziaur Rahman government's support base included several groups with a strong interest in the expansion of Islamic education: the Ulema (Islamic scholars) who staffed the Madrasa institutions and whose social prestige and economic interests were tied to the expansion of the Madrasa system; the conservative middle classes of rural Bangladesh who felt that the secular nationalism of the Mujib period had been dismissive of their religious identity; the Islamic political parties, particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami and its affiliated organizations, whose support was valuable to the Zia government even though formal Jamaat participation in politics was initially restricted; and the organizational networks of the Madrasa system itself, which constituted a dense civil society infrastructure reaching into every part of the country.

This political coalition in favor of Islamic educational expansion was, and remains, a powerful force in Bangladeshi politics. Any government that seeks to reduce the role of Islamic education in the national educational framework must contend with the organized political resistance of this coalition. Conversely, governments that support and expand Islamic education can draw on this coalition's political support. This political dynamic is a structural feature of Bangladeshi educational politics that has operated consistently across party lines and governmental changes for more than four decades.

The jurisprudential dimension of the Islamic reorientation of education is also significant. The constitutional recognition of Islam as a source of values (and later, under Ershad, as the state religion) created a legal framework within which Islamic educational institutions could claim a form of constitutional legitimation for their distinctive approach to education. The tension between this Islamic constitutional identity and the secularist provisions of the original 1972 Constitution (which were modified but not entirely eliminated by subsequent amendments) represents an unresolved constitutional paradox that has implications for educational law and policy.

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Chapter Three: The Ershad Period: Institutional Expansion and Ideological Consolidation, 1982 to 1990

3.1 The Ershad Government and Its Educational Agenda

Hussain Muhammad Ershad came to power through a coup in March 1982 and governed Bangladesh as Chief Martial Law Administrator until 1986, then as President of an elected government (subject to serious questions about the fairness of the elections) until his fall from power in December 1990. The Ershad period is one of considerable educational significance, marked by the constitutional establishment of Islam as the state religion, the massive expansion of the Madrasa system, and significant growth in school enrollment that laid some of the foundations for the enrollment success of the subsequent decades.

The declaration of Islam as the state religion through the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution in 1988 was the most consequential single act of the Ershad period for the relationship between religion and education. This constitutional change gave the Islamic character of the state an explicit legal recognition that went beyond anything in the Zia period's amendments, and it created a constitutional environment that was unambiguously supportive of Islamic educational institutions and Islamic educational values. The Ershad government's subsequent expansion of the Aliya Madrasa system and its more sympathetic relationship with the Qawmi Madrasa community reflected and reinforced this constitutional orientation.

The educational policy of the Ershad period also reflected the government's political strategy of cultivating support from rural conservative communities through the expansion of government services, including education, in rural areas. The construction of new school buildings, the appointment of new teachers (often through processes that were heavily influenced by political patronage), and the expansion of the Madrasa system were all components of a political strategy of rural mobilization that had genuine educational dimensions alongside its political ones.

3.2 The Majid Commission and Educational Decentralization

The Ershad government established its own national education commission, chaired by Dr. Moinuddin Khan (commonly known as the Majid Commission after a later commission of the same period). The commission's recommendations reflected the political and ideological priorities of the Ershad government: greater emphasis on Islamic education, continued expansion of the Madrasa system, vocational and technical education as a development priority, and some attention to educational decentralization through the strengthening of district and sub-district educational administration.

The emphasis on vocational and technical education in the Ershad period reflected a genuine developmental aspiration that was not entirely cynical. Bangladesh's garment industry was beginning its extraordinary expansion in the 1980s, creating a growing demand for skilled workers, supervisors, and managers. The government's recognition that the educational system was not producing the kinds of technical skills that a growing industrial economy required led to

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policy attention to technical and vocational education that, while inadequately implemented, represented an important recognition of the structural mismatch between educational outputs and labor market needs.

The administrative reforms of the Ershad period also had educational dimensions. The establishment of the Upazila (sub-district) as the basic unit of local administration, which was one of Ershad's most significant institutional innovations, had implications for educational administration: the Upazila became the basic unit of school management and administration, with Upazila-level Education Officers responsible for the supervision and management of primary and secondary schools within their jurisdiction. This administrative structure, which remains the basic framework of local educational administration to the present day, was a product of the Ershad period's institutional engineering.

3.3 The Mass Movement and Educational Demands: The End of the Ershad Era

The popular movement that brought down the Ershad government in December 1990 was driven by multiple grievances, including corruption, authoritarianism, and the manipulation of electoral processes. But it also had an educational dimension that is not always recognized. Students and teachers were among the most active participants in the mass movement that ended Ershad's rule, and their participation reflected genuine grievances about the state of education: the politicization of educational appointments, the deterioration of educational quality, the corruption of the examination system, and the failure of the educational system to provide the economic opportunities that families were sacrificing to obtain.

The student protests of the late 1980s and early 1990s were not simply political mobilizations. They expressed a deep social frustration with an educational system that was producing credentials without competence, that was corrupted by political patronage, and that was failing to deliver the social mobility that families had been promised. This frustration was a harbinger of the more dramatic student protests that would follow three and a half decades later in 2024, suggesting that the structural disconnection between educational investment and educational outcome is a recurring source of political tension in Bangladesh that the political system has never adequately resolved.

Chapter Four: The Democratic Transition and the Politics of Educational Reform, 1991 to 2000

4.1 The Restoration of Democracy and the Educational Agenda

The transition to democratic governance that followed Ershad's fall opened a new chapter in Bangladesh's political and educational history. The elections of February 1991 brought the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under Khaleda Zia to power, and the subsequent decade saw alternating governments of the BNP and the Awami League (AL), with the Awami League winning elections in 1996 and the BNP returning to power in 2001. This period of competitive

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democratic politics had significant implications for educational policy, both positive and negative.

The positive dimensions were real. The restoration of democracy created space for civil society engagement with educational policy that had been constrained under military government. Research organizations, advocacy groups, and NGOs including the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), BRAC, and various international development organizations were able to engage more freely with educational policy debates and to advocate for educational reforms. The media could report more openly on educational problems, including examination irregularities, teacher absenteeism, and the learning crisis. And the competitive logic of electoral politics created incentives for governments to demonstrate educational performance, both by expanding enrollment and by at least appearing to address quality problems.

The negative dimensions were also real. The restoration of competitive party politics introduced a new dimension of political competition into educational administration that had damaging effects on educational institutions. The BNP and the Awami League, the two dominant parties of the democratic period, each had strong links to particular networks of educational institutions, teacher unions, student organizations, and Madrasa communities. Control of educational institutions was politically valuable, both as a source of patronage and as a base for political mobilization. The result was a progressive politicization of educational governance in which appointments, promotions, and institutional decisions were increasingly made on the basis of political loyalty rather than professional merit.

4.2 The Female Secondary School Assistance Program: Politics and Policy Success

One of the most significant educational policy achievements of the democratic period was the Female Secondary School Assistance Program (FSSAP), launched in 1994 by the BNP government of Khaleda Zia with support from the World Bank. The FSSAP provided stipends to girls enrolled in secondary schools in rural areas, conditional on maintaining a minimum attendance rate and achieving passing grades in annual examinations. The girls who received stipends were also exempt from paying school tuition fees. The program was designed to address the specific barriers that reduced girls' secondary school enrollment: the direct costs of school fees, the indirect costs of girls' time away from household duties, and the reluctance of families to invest in daughters' education given uncertain returns.

The political economy of the FSSAP is instructive. The program was supported by the World Bank and was consistent with the international development community's growing emphasis on girls' education as a development priority. It had broad political support across party lines because it provided tangible benefits to a very large number of rural families and because the improvement of girls' education was not a politically contested goal in the way that, for example, Madrasa reform or curriculum secularization would have been. The FSSAP is, in this sense, an example of what political scientists call a "valence issue" in educational policy: an issue on which all parties are on the same side, and which therefore generates the kind of broad political support that is necessary for sustained policy implementation.

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The results of the FSSAP were dramatic. Female enrollment at the secondary level increased rapidly following the program's introduction, and Bangladesh achieved gender parity at the secondary level within a decade of the program's launch. The FSSAP became one of the most cited success stories in international development education, studied and emulated by governments and development organizations around the world. Its success demonstrated that targeted financial interventions can be highly effective in changing enrollment behavior even in very poor communities with strong cultural constraints on girls' education.

But the FSSAP's success also had limitations that are less often acknowledged. The program increased enrollment dramatically but did not have equivalent effects on learning quality, retention to completion, or the translation of schooling into economic empowerment. Many girls who enrolled in secondary school because of the stipend program did not complete the full secondary cycle, and many who completed it did not achieve learning outcomes that significantly improved their life chances. The FSSAP addressed supply-side barriers to girls' education with remarkable effectiveness, but it did not address the deeper cultural, social, and economic factors that limit the returns to girls' education even when enrollment is achieved.

4.3 The Communicative Language Teaching Reform: A Pedagogical and Political Failure

The 1990s also witnessed one of the most instructive examples of educational reform failure in Bangladesh's history: the attempt to introduce Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the methodology for English instruction across the secondary level. This reform, supported by the British Council and subsequently by USAID, was based on the sound observation that the existing grammar-translation method of English teaching was producing graduates who could parse English sentences but could not communicate in English. The CLT approach, which emphasizes authentic communication, meaningful language use, and the development of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) rather than grammatical analysis alone, had an excellent evidence base from international research and was broadly consistent with the best thinking in applied linguistics of the 1990s.

The CLT reform failed in Bangladesh, and its failure is a case study in the political and institutional sociology of educational reform. Several specific failure mechanisms can be identified.

The most fundamental problem was the gap between the professional assumptions of the reform and the professional reality of the teaching workforce. CLT assumes teachers who are themselves communicatively competent in English, who understand the theoretical principles of language acquisition, who can create and manage communicative activities in their classrooms, and who have the professional autonomy and the institutional support to implement new approaches even when they are unfamiliar and initially uncomfortable. The reality of Bangladesh's English teaching workforce in the 1990s was that most teachers had been trained in the grammar-translation method, had limited communicative English proficiency themselves, had large classes that made communicative activities physically and logistically difficult, and operated in an institutional environment in which the examination, which continued to test grammar and reading comprehension rather than communicative competence, was the ultimate measure of their performance.

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The training provided to teachers in the CLT approach was also inadequate in duration, depth, and follow-up. A short intensive training course, however well-designed, is not sufficient to transform deeply embedded pedagogical habits and cultural assumptions about the teacher's role and the nature of language learning. Sustained coaching, observation, feedback, and professional community are necessary to support teachers in developing genuinely new pedagogical approaches, and these supports were not provided systematically.

The CLT reform is remembered in the Bangladeshi educational research literature as a cautionary tale about the limits of methodology-focused reform that ignores the systemic conditions of implementation. Its lessons were not fully absorbed by subsequent reformers, as the equally ambitious 2023 curriculum reform would demonstrate.

4.4 The Growth of Private Education and the English-Medium Sector

The democratic period of the 1990s was also the period of rapid expansion of private education in Bangladesh. The Private University Act of 1992, enacted by the BNP government of Khaleda Zia, opened the way for the establishment of private universities, which expanded rapidly from the mid-1990s onward. By the late 2000s, there were dozens of private universities operating in Bangladesh, and by the early 2020s the number exceeded one hundred and fifty, enrolling several million students.

The expansion of private higher education was driven by several forces. The public university system was severely overcrowded, with demand for university places far exceeding supply. The quality and environment of public universities was deteriorating, driven by political interference, student politics violence, and resource scarcity. Middle-class families were increasingly able to pay for private education, and the economic returns to higher education made private tuition fees, while burdensome, financially defensible. And the political economy of private university regulation was permissive: the Private University Act of 1992 established a regulatory framework that was in practice very weakly enforced, allowing private universities to operate with minimal quality assurance.

The English-medium school sector also expanded significantly during this period, responding to the growing aspiration of the urban middle class and professional class for an education that would equip their children for global opportunities. The emergence of a significant garment industry managerial class, an expanding professional and business class, and a large diaspora community with members returning from or maintaining connections with English-speaking countries, created a growing market for English-medium education at the pre-tertiary level. The school sector responded with the proliferation of private English-medium schools following international curricula, primarily the Cambridge International and the Edexcel systems, which provided internationally recognized qualifications at the secondary level.

Chapter Five: Governance, Quality, and the Politics of Examination: The 2000s

5.1 The BNP-Jamaat Government and Educational Politics, 2001 to 2006

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The BNP government that came to power in October 2001, in coalition with the Jamaat-e-Islami, represented the most explicitly Islamically oriented government since the Ershad period. The educational implications of this coalition's formation were significant. The Jamaat-e-Islami, which controlled the Madrasa portfolio in the coalition government, used its governmental position to advance the interests of the Madrasa educational system, increasing government support for Aliya Madrasas, facilitating the expansion of the Qawmi system, and resisting reforms that would have secularized the Madrasa curriculum.

The BNP-Jamaat government also oversaw a period of escalating examination irregularity that had serious consequences for educational integrity. The SSC and HSC examinations of the early to mid-2000s were marked by increasing levels of question leakage, impersonation of candidates, and collusion between supervisors and students in examination halls. The government's response to these irregularities was inadequate, reflecting a combination of administrative incapacity and political unwillingness to enforce discipline in institutions where political patronage networks were involved.

The textbook politics of the BNP-Jamaat period also deserve attention. The NCTB textbooks produced during this period incorporated Islamic content more explicitly than those of the Awami League period, and some passages from minority religion perspectives that had appeared in earlier textbooks were removed or modified. These textbook changes were politically motivated and caused significant controversy among secular and minority community advocates, who argued that the incorporation of explicitly Islamic content into national textbooks amounted to religious discrimination against the non-Muslim minority.

5.2 The Caretaker Government, Electoral Reform, and the Education Sector, 2007 to 2008

The political crisis of 2006 to 2007, which culminated in the installation of a military-backed caretaker government in January 2007, had distinctive educational implications. The caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed, which governed Bangladesh from January 2007 to December 2008, pursued an ambitious anti-corruption agenda that extended to the educational sector. Several educational officials were prosecuted or investigated for corruption related to textbook procurement, examination irregularities, and appointment processes. These prosecutions, while selective in their application, represented an unusual moment of institutional accountability in a sector where corruption had become deeply embedded.

The caretaker government also presided over a significant revision of the SSC and HSC examination processes, introducing new security measures designed to reduce question leakage and examination irregularities. These technical reforms had some positive effects in the short term but did not address the underlying institutional and cultural conditions that generated examination irregularity.

Of more lasting educational significance was the caretaker government's initiation of a comprehensive review of the national curriculum, which laid the groundwork for the curriculum reform that would be developed and implemented under Sheikh Hasina's subsequent government. The curriculum review process, which drew on international expertise and on extensive consultation with educational stakeholders, produced a framework for a more

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competency-based, learner-centered approach to education that would eventually become the National Curriculum Framework of 2012 and, more ambitiously, the curriculum reform of 2023.

Chapter Six: The Hasina Era: Ambition, Achievement, and Authoritarian Drift, 2009 to 2024

6.1 Digital Bangladesh and the Modernization Vision of Education

Sheikh Hasina's government, which came to power in January 2009 following the Awami League's landslide victory in the December 2008 elections, launched the most sustained and in many respects most ambitious period of educational reform in Bangladesh's history. The government's signature development vision, "Digital Bangladesh," articulated in the Awami League's electoral manifesto and subsequently developed into a comprehensive development framework, had significant educational dimensions. The aspiration to transform Bangladesh into a technology-oriented middle-income country by 2021 (the fiftieth anniversary of independence) required a transformation of the educational system to produce the skilled human capital that a knowledge economy demands.

The educational policies of the Hasina period can be organized around several major themes: the expansion of enrollment and physical infrastructure, the reform of textbooks and curriculum, the management of the examination system, the relationship with the Madrasa sector, the development of digital educational tools and infrastructure, and the increasingly authoritarian management of educational institutions, particularly universities.

The enrollment expansion of the Hasina period built on the achievements of the democratic period and pushed Bangladesh toward the achievement of near-universal primary enrollment and significant improvements in secondary enrollment. The annual free textbook distribution program, which by the late 2010s was distributing several hundred million textbooks annually to students at all levels of the general and Madrasa systems, was a genuine logistical achievement and a powerful demonstration of the state's commitment to educational access. The improvement of primary school physical infrastructure, including the construction and upgrading of thousands of classrooms, the provision of separate toilet facilities for girls (a significant factor in girls' attendance), and the gradual improvement of access to electricity, represented a sustained investment in the physical conditions of schooling.

6.2 The National Curriculum Framework 2012 and the Road to Reform

One of the most significant educational policy documents of the Hasina era was the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 2012, which laid out a new philosophical and pedagogical direction for Bangladesh's general education system. The NCF 2012 was informed by constructivist learning theory, drawing on the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, and their successors, and committed to a more learner-centered, competency-based approach to education. It articulated a vision of education oriented toward the development of specific competencies:

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literacy, numeracy, scientific thinking, critical thinking, creativity, social responsibility, and others, rather than toward the transmission of fixed bodies of content.

The NCF 2012 was an important conceptual achievement, representing a genuine attempt to bring Bangladesh's curriculum framework into alignment with international best practice in educational theory and pedagogy. But the gap between the framework document and the actual practice of teaching and assessment in Bangladesh's schools was enormous. The textbooks produced under the NCF 2012 were somewhat improved in their pedagogical approach compared to their predecessors, but the teacher training that would have been necessary to implement the framework's pedagogical vision was inadequate. The examination system, which remained oriented toward written tests of content knowledge, continued to drive classroom practice in directions that were inconsistent with the framework's competency-based aspirations.

The political economy of the NCF 2012 is interesting. The development of the framework was supported by the Asian Development Bank and drew on technical assistance from international curriculum specialists. The framework's progressive pedagogical orientation reflected the influence of international development thinking, particularly the "learning outcomes" framework that had become dominant in international educational policy discourse following the UNESCO Education for All initiatives of the 2000s. This international influence was genuinely positive in many respects, bringing sophisticated ideas into the Bangladeshi curriculum policy discourse. But it also reflected the asymmetric power relationship between international donors and the Bangladeshi state discussed in Part Two, and some critics argued that the framework's pedagogical approach was borrowed from international models without adequate attention to the specific conditions of Bangladeshi classrooms and the specific cultural frameworks of Bangladeshi educational practice.

6.3 Textbook Politics and the War of Historical Memory

One of the most politically charged dimensions of educational policy under the Hasina government was the management of history textbooks, particularly at the secondary level. The content of history education is always politically sensitive, because history textbooks are among the most powerful instruments through which the state constructs and transmits a particular version of the national narrative. In Bangladesh, where the founding moment of 1971 is the central reference point of national identity and where the history of the Liberation War is deeply contested among the country's political parties, the content of history textbooks is a matter of intense political sensitivity.

The Hasina government's approach to history textbooks was characterized by a strong emphasis on the Awami League's version of the Liberation War narrative, in which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's role was central and foundational. The textbooks produced under the Hasina government gave prominent place to Mujibur Rahman's "Declaration of Independence" (as distinct from the declaration made by the acting government in the name of the liberation forces), to the Awami League's leadership of the liberation movement, and to the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military and by their Bangladeshi collaborators, including the Jamaat-e-Islami, during the war.

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The BNP's competing narrative of the Liberation War, which gives greater prominence to Ziaur Rahman's role (as the military commander who read the declaration of independence on radio) and which is more reticent about the role of the Jamaat-e-Islami's wartime collaborators (given the BNP's coalition relationship with the Jamaat), was systematically marginalized in the NCTB textbooks of the Hasina period. This partisan approach to historical education was criticized by educators, journalists, and civil society organizations who argued that textbooks should present multiple perspectives on contested historical events rather than serving as instruments of political mobilization for the ruling party.

The textbook controversy extended beyond history to include the portrayal of religious life in Bangladesh. Under the Hasina government, certain changes to textbooks that had been made under the BNP-Jamaat government, including the removal of some content from non-Islamic religious traditions, were reversed. But the management of religious content in textbooks remained contentious, with critics from Islamist organizations arguing that the Hasina government's textbooks were insufficiently respectful of Islamic values, and critics from secular and minority communities arguing that they remained excessively oriented toward Islamic cultural assumptions.

6.4 The Examination System in Crisis: Leakage, Grade Inflation, and the GPA Arms Race

The examination system under the Hasina government experienced a crisis of integrity that is one of the most discussed and most damaging aspects of the educational record of this period. The SSC and HSC examinations of the 2010s were marked by systematic question leakage on a scale that had not been seen before, with examination questions circulating on social media hours before the examination date in some cases. The government's initial response was denial, followed by belated technical countermeasures and the prosecution of some individuals involved in leakage networks.

The leakage crisis was accompanied by a dramatic inflation in public examination grades that raised serious questions about the integrity of the assessment system. The proportion of candidates achieving GPA 5.0 (the highest possible grade) in the SSC and HSC examinations increased dramatically during the 2010s, from a small fraction to a very large proportion of all candidates. This grade inflation was partly a result of examination leakage, which allowed many more candidates to perform at a level they could not otherwise have achieved. But it was also a result of the political incentives that the government faced: a government that could point to high GPAs as evidence of educational progress had an interest in an assessment system that produced high grades, even if those grades did not reflect genuine learning achievement.

The consequence of grade inflation was a profound devaluation of the public examination credential. When a very large proportion of candidates achieve the highest grade, the grade loses its ability to discriminate among candidates and to signal genuine academic achievement. Universities and employers found that they could no longer rely on SSC and HSC grades as meaningful indicators of student ability, forcing them to rely more heavily on their own entrance examinations and to develop alternative selection mechanisms. The devaluation of the public examination credential was a direct result of the political management of the examination system, and it damaged the educational system in ways that will take years to repair.

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The PSC and JSC examinations introduced at the primary and lower secondary levels during the Hasina period were also controversial. Educational researchers and child development specialists consistently argued that public examinations at the ages of eight and twelve (the PSC and JSC) were developmentally inappropriate, imposed excessive stress on young children, distorted classroom teaching toward examination preparation at ages when exploration and play should be the dominant pedagogical mode, and contributed to the coaching industry explosion. These examinations were eventually abolished under the 2023 curriculum reform, a belated acknowledgment that their introduction had been educationally damaging.

6.5 The Relationship with the Madrasa Sector: Accommodation and Conflict

The Hasina government's relationship with the Madrasa sector was complex and evolved significantly over the course of its long tenure. The Awami League had historically been associated with secularism and had been suspicious of the Madrasa system's role in Bangladeshi society. But the political realities of governance in a predominantly Muslim country with a large and organized Madrasa community forced a more accommodating approach than the party's founding ideology might have suggested.

The most dramatic expression of this accommodation was the recognition of the Qawmi Madrasa's Dawra-e-Hadith certificate as equivalent to a Master's degree, granted in 2017 following negotiations with the Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh. This recognition was explicitly political in its motivation: the Hasina government was seeking to defuse the political tension with the Qawmi Madrasa community that had escalated following the Hefazat-e-Islam's mass mobilization in Dhaka in 2013. The recognition of the Dawra-e-Hadith was the price of that political accommodation, and it was granted without any of the curriculum reform or quality assurance mechanisms that educational experts argued should accompany such recognition.

The Hefazat-e-Islam's 2013 mobilization and its subsequent political relationship with the Hasina government is one of the most instructive episodes in the political sociology of religious education in Bangladesh. Hefazat's thirteen-point demand, which included the reinstatement of Islamic language in the constitutional preamble, the punishment of "atheist bloggers," and the segregation of men and women in public spaces, reflected the cultural and religious conservatism of the Qawmi Madrasa community and its discomfort with the modernizing agenda of the Hasina government. The government's violent dispersal of the Hefazat sit-in at Shapla Chattar in Dhaka in May 2013 was followed by a period of political negotiation that eventually produced the 2017 recognition of Qawmi qualifications.

The Madrasa sector's relationship with the Hasina government also involved more positive dimensions. The government's continued funding of the Aliya Madrasa system, the inclusion of Madrasa students in the national textbook distribution program, and various measures to improve the physical infrastructure of Madrasa institutions represented a sustained public investment in an educational sector that the Awami League's secular ideology might have led it to neglect.

6.6 University Governance and the Politicization of Higher Education

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The most damaging dimension of the Hasina era's educational record was arguably the management of public universities. The relationship between the ruling party and public universities underwent a progressive deterioration over the years of the Hasina government that culminated in the conditions that produced the 2024 student revolution.

The Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student organization affiliated with the Awami League, became an increasingly dominant and increasingly violent force on public university campuses during the Hasina years. BCL activists occupied university dormitories, extorted money from fellow students, physically attacked opposition student leaders and sometimes faculty members, and created an atmosphere of intimidation and fear that was deeply corrosive to the intellectual life and institutional integrity of public universities. The BCL's dominance on campuses was not simply a matter of individual thuggery. It was a structural feature of the relationship between the ruling party and the university system, in which the party used its student organization as an instrument of political control over institutions that were important sites of potential opposition.

The appointment of vice-chancellors and other senior university administrators was increasingly made on the basis of political loyalty to the Awami League rather than on the basis of academic distinction, administrative competence, or institutional suitability. Vice-chancellors who were political loyalists protected the BCL's activities on campus, resisted demands from faculty and students for accountability and academic freedom, and managed their institutions in ways that served party political interests rather than academic institutional interests. This deeply corrupted governance structure produced the conditions of institutional decay described in Part One.

The suppression of student protest and academic dissent on university campuses was a consistent feature of the Hasina government's management of higher education. Student activists who organized political protests, wrote critically about the government's policies, or challenged the BCL's dominance were subjected to disciplinary action, expulsion, arrest, and in some cases violence. This suppression of academic freedom and student political activity created the atmosphere of frustration and anger that would eventually explode in the 2024 student uprising.

6.7 The National Education Policy 2010 and the Question of Implementation

The Hasina government's National Education Policy of 2010 was the most comprehensive educational policy framework produced by any Bangladeshi government since the Qudrat-e-Khuda report of 1974. Drawing on the recommendations of a commission chaired by the educationist Kabir Chowdhury, the NEP 2010 addressed the full range of educational provision from pre-primary to higher education and research. It made ambitious commitments on universal primary education, secondary education expansion, curriculum reform, teacher development, non-formal education, and the integration of the three educational streams.

The NEP 2010's approach to the Madrasa sector was politically careful but educationally significant. It affirmed the place of the Aliya Madrasa within the mainstream of the educational system while recommending curricular reforms that would strengthen its secular subjects. It was more reticent about the Qawmi system, calling for dialogue with the Qawmi Madrasa authorities about curriculum reform without making specific regulatory proposals.

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The implementation record of the NEP 2010 was, predictably, mixed. The commitments on enrollment expansion and physical infrastructure were substantially achieved. The commitments on curriculum reform were partially achieved, through the NCF 2012 and eventually the more ambitious 2023 curriculum reform. The commitments on teacher development were more incompletely realized, as the structural problems of teacher training discussed in Part Two proved resistant to the reforms recommended in the policy. The commitments on educational quality, measured by learning outcomes, were largely unrealized, as the learning crisis described in Part One deepened even as enrollment expanded.

The implementation gap of the NEP 2010 reflects the general pattern of educational reform in Bangladesh discussed in Part Two: ambitious policy aspiration, followed by partial and uneven implementation that falls far short of the original vision, driven by the structural constraints of bureaucratic capacity, resource limitation, and political interference. Understanding this pattern and designing reform strategies that are more implementation-sensitive is one of the most important challenges facing Bangladeshi educational reformers.

Chapter Seven: The 2023 Curriculum Reform: Philosophy, Politics, and Controversy

7.1 The Origins and Architecture of the Reform

The 2023 curriculum reform, formally known as the New Curriculum (Notun Patasuchi) and based on the National Curriculum Framework 2021, represents the most fundamental reform of Bangladesh's general education curriculum since independence. Understanding its origins, its philosophical foundations, its implementation challenges, and its political fate is essential for understanding the current state of Bangladeshi educational policy.

The reform emerged from a process of curriculum review and development that had been underway since the late 2000s. The NCTB, working with educational researchers, curriculum specialists, and international development partners, developed a new curriculum framework based on a social constructivist theory of learning that drew on the traditions of Dewey, Vygotsky, and more recent constructivist theorists. The framework identified a set of core competencies, including critical thinking, creative thinking, effective communication, collaborative working, digital literacy, environmental sensitivity, and ethical responsibility, that all students should develop through their educational experience.

The reform proposed a significant change in the pedagogical approach: away from the transmission of information through lectures and rote memorization and toward the development of competencies through activity, inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. The assessment approach was to shift from annual written examinations to continuous assessment through multiple methods including projects, presentations, portfolios, and peer assessment, with written examinations playing a smaller and less dominant role.

The structural changes proposed by the reform were also significant. The PSC examination at grade 5 and the JSC examination at grade 8 were abolished, reducing the number of public

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examinations in the school career from five to two (the SSC at grade 10 and the HSC at grade 12). The stream selection that had historically occurred at grade 9, dividing students into science, arts, and commerce, was postponed until grade 11, maintaining a common core curriculum through grade 10. These structural changes were designed to reduce examination pressure, promote a more holistic educational experience, and delay premature specialization.

7.2 The Philosophical Foundations: Strengths and Limitations

The philosophical foundations of the 2023 reform are, in principle, sound. The social constructivist theory of learning on which it is based has a strong evidence base, and the critique of rote memorization and examination-centered education that motivates the reform is entirely well-founded. The competency framework reflects a thoughtful analysis of the kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that twenty-first century citizens and workers need, and it draws intelligently on international curriculum frameworks including those of Singapore, Finland, and the OECD's Education 2030 framework.

But the philosophical foundations of the reform also contain important tensions and limitations. The most fundamental is the tension between the constructivist theory of learning, which emphasizes student agency, exploration, and the construction of understanding through experience, and the social reality of the Bangladeshi classroom, which is characterized by very high student-teacher ratios, limited physical space and resources for activity-based learning, and a deeply embedded pedagogical culture of teacher-directed instruction. Constructivist pedagogy developed in the educational research of wealthy countries with very different classroom conditions from those that prevail in the majority of Bangladesh's schools. The transfer of constructivist principles to the Bangladeshi context requires not merely curriculum revision but fundamental transformation of classroom conditions, teacher professional development, and the social norms of educational practice.

The assessment reform, while pedagogically principled, raises serious questions about validity, reliability, and equity in the specific Bangladeshi context. School-based continuous assessment conducted by individual teachers is only as good as the professional judgment and subject knowledge of those teachers. In a system where teacher quality is highly unequal and where the professional standards for assessment practice have not been systematically developed, school-based assessment is likely to produce results that are unreliable, inconsistent, and susceptible to various forms of bias and influence. The transition from standardized external examinations to school-based assessment, without the development of the professional infrastructure necessary to support high-quality school-based assessment, risks trading one set of problems for another.

7.3 The Political Context of Implementation: A Reform Under Siege

The implementation of the 2023 curriculum reform from 2023 onward occurred in a political context that was in many respects hostile to its success. The reform was strongly associated with the Awami League government that had developed and launched it, which meant that it was evaluated by significant segments of the population through a political lens rather than a purely educational one. Critics of the Hasina government, including the BNP and Islamist

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organizations, were predisposed to criticize the reform, and they found genuine educational grounds for criticism that merged with political opposition to the government itself.

The Hefazat-e-Islam and allied Islamist organizations were vocal opponents of the curriculum reform, arguing that its content was insufficiently Islamic, that its emphasis on "values education" contained elements inconsistent with Islamic ethics, and that its activity-based pedagogy undermined the authority of teachers and the discipline of the traditional classroom in ways that conflicted with Islamic educational norms. These criticisms were politically powerful because they connected educational concerns with the religious identity of a large segment of the population.

Parents across the political spectrum expressed concerns about the reform, particularly about the abolition of the PSC and JSC examinations and the shift to school-based continuous assessment. Many parents felt that without the external examinations that had previously provided reliable and comparable assessments of their children's progress, they could not know whether their children were learning adequately. The trust in school-based assessment as a reliable measure of learning was low, both because of the uneven quality of teachers and because of the potential for personal relationships, local politics, and informal payments to influence assessment outcomes in a system where professional norms were not strong.

Teachers themselves had deeply mixed responses to the reform. Some teachers, particularly those who had access to good professional development, who taught in well-resourced schools, and who were philosophically sympathetic to the reform's principles, embraced the new approach enthusiastically and reported positive experiences. But many more teachers, particularly those in rural schools with limited resources and limited professional development support, found the new approach confusing, difficult to implement, and inadequately supported by the training and materials provided.

7.4 The Political Fate of the 2023 Reform After August 2024

The student revolution of July and August 2024, which ended the Hasina government, had immediate implications for the 2023 curriculum reform. The reform's association with the Awami League government made it politically vulnerable in the post-revolution context. The Islamist organizations that had opposed the reform were prominent in the political landscape of the post-revolution period, and their calls for the revision or abandonment of the curriculum reform had greater political resonance in the new political environment.

The interim government of Muhammad Yunus, which governed from August 2024, took a cautious approach to the curriculum reform, neither abandoning it entirely nor committing to its full implementation. Educational experts appointed to review the reform raised concerns about both its content and its implementation process, and the review process itself became a site of political contestation between groups with different educational philosophies and different political allegiances.

The emerging picture as of 2026 is one of uncertainty and partial modification rather than either full implementation or complete reversal. Some elements of the 2023 reform, particularly the

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abolition of the PSC and JSC examinations, appear likely to be maintained, as there is broad consensus that these examinations were educationally harmful. Other elements, particularly the school-based continuous assessment approach and the activity-based pedagogy, remain contested, with ongoing debate about whether to modify, scale back, or strengthen them.

Chapter Eight: The Revolution of 2024: Students, Politics, and the Educational Crisis of a Generation

8.1 The Quota Movement: Education, Employment, and the Politics of Opportunity

The student uprising of July and August 2024 that ended the Hasina government was, at its immediate origins, a protest against the government employment quota system. The quota system, which reserved a proportion of government jobs for the descendants of freedom fighters (Muktijoddha), as well as quotas for women, disabled persons, and ethnic minorities, had been a contentious feature of Bangladeshi public employment for decades. The High Court's restoration of the freedom fighter quota in June 2024, following its earlier abolition by the government, triggered student protests that escalated rapidly into a mass uprising driven by much deeper frustrations than the quota question alone.

The educational dimensions of the quota crisis are fundamental and deserve careful analysis. The government employment quota was contentious not because students were opposed to affirmative action in principle, but because it affected access to government jobs that were among the most valued career destinations for university graduates in a context of very high graduate unemployment. The structural mismatch between the output of Bangladesh's educational system (hundreds of thousands of graduates annually) and the capacity of the economy to absorb them in meaningful employment had created a generation of educated young people who had invested enormous resources, financial and personal, in their education only to find that the economic returns were far lower than they had been promised.

This generation had graduated from an educational system that had expanded dramatically in terms of enrollment and credentialing while failing to deliver proportionate improvements in learning quality. They had certificates but often lacked the competencies that meaningful employment required. They faced an economy in which formal sector job growth had not kept pace with graduate output, in which the government sector remained the dominant source of formal employment for many graduates, and in which access to government jobs was determined partly by examination performance (itself shaped by access to coaching and quality schooling) and partly by the quota system.

The combination of educational investment that had not delivered the promised returns, a competitive labor market in which educated young people faced intense competition for limited opportunities, and a political system in which the ruling party's supporters received preferential access to state resources including employment created the conditions of frustration and anger that the quota question ignited.

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8.2 The Deeper Educational Grievances: Quality, Accountability, and Freedom

Behind the immediate quota controversy lay a set of deeper educational grievances that had been accumulating for years and that found expression in the 2024 uprising. The suppression of student political activity and academic freedom on university campuses, the BCL's intimidation and violence, the corruption of university governance, the appointment of academically unqualified vice-chancellors through political loyalty, the deterioration of physical infrastructure, the inadequacy of research funding, and the overall atmosphere of institutional dysfunction and political subordination on public university campuses were all genuine grievances that fed into the uprising.

The students who led the 2024 uprising were not simply protesting a quota system. They were expressing a fundamental rejection of an educational system that had failed them and a political system that treated their educational institutions as instruments of party control rather than as spaces of learning, inquiry, and democratic citizenship. The uprising was, in this sense, an educational revolution as much as a political one: a demand for an educational system that treated students as citizens rather than as subjects, that prioritized learning rather than political loyalty, and that served the national interest rather than the interests of the ruling party.

The violence with which the government initially responded to the student protests, including the shooting of students by security forces that killed dozens of young people, transformed the quota protest into a mass uprising with the demand for the government's resignation. The subsequent resignation of Sheikh Hasina and her departure from the country marked the end of the longest period of Awami League rule in Bangladesh's history and opened a new and uncertain chapter in the country's political and educational development.

8.3 The Educational Demands of the Post-Revolution Period

The political revolution of 2024 generated a wide range of educational demands from students, teachers, civil society organizations, and political parties. These demands reflected the diverse grievances that had accumulated over the years of the Hasina government and the broader aspirations for educational transformation that the revolutionary moment seemed to make possible.

The demands from the university sector focused primarily on governance: the removal of politically appointed vice-chancellors and their replacement with academically distinguished leaders chosen through merit-based processes, the disbanding of the BCL and the end of political party student organizations' dominance of campus life, the restoration of genuine academic freedom and the right to political expression on campuses, the improvement of dormitory conditions and living facilities, and increased research funding.

The demands from the school sector were more varied, reflecting the diverse constituencies of the general education system. Islamist organizations demanded the reversal of what they characterized as the anti-Islamic elements of the 2023 curriculum reform. Progressive educationists demanded the completion of the curriculum reform and its proper implementation with adequate teacher development support. Parents expressed concerns about assessment

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quality and examination integrity. Teachers' organizations demanded improved pay, better working conditions, and greater professional autonomy.

The interim government, and subsequently the BNP-led government that followed it, faced the challenge of responding to these diverse and sometimes contradictory demands in a context of political uncertainty, economic constraint, and institutional weakness. The management of this challenge in the period from August 2024 to the present is the most recent chapter in Bangladesh's educational political history.

Chapter Nine: The Interim Government and the Emerging Post-2024 Educational Landscape

9.1 Muhammad Yunus and the Educational Agenda of the Interim Government

Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel Laureate economist and founder of Grameen Bank, brought to the interim government a distinctive perspective on education shaped by his decades of work in development finance and social enterprise. Yunus's educational philosophy, informed by his experience with the Grameen Bank's approach to human development, emphasized the development of individual agency, social enterprise, and practical problem-solving competence over the transmission of abstract knowledge.

The interim government's approach to educational reform was necessarily limited by its transitional character. Its primary mandate was to stabilize the political situation, prepare the country for elections, and address the most urgent institutional crises, including in the educational sector. The most immediate educational priorities were the removal of BCL-affiliated administrators and student leaders from public universities, the restoration of order and safety on campuses, and the beginning of a review of the 2023 curriculum reform.

The interim government's educational appointments were significant. Several respected educators and educational researchers were appointed to advisory roles, signaling an intention to bring academic and professional expertise into educational policy rather than relying exclusively on political loyalists. The review of the 2023 curriculum reform was initiated with genuine engagement of educational stakeholders, though the political pressures on this review from Islamist organizations and other political actors were significant.

9.2 The BNP's Educational Manifesto and Its Implementation Challenges

The BNP government that assumed power following elections in 2025 entered office with a set of educational commitments outlined in its manifesto that represented its vision for educational transformation in the post-Hasina era. The manifesto's educational commitments, analyzed briefly in Part One, deserve more detailed examination here.

The BNP manifesto's commitment to free education for women up to postgraduate level and for men up to undergraduate level is one of the most ambitious and potentially transformative

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educational policy proposals in Bangladesh's recent political history. If implemented, this commitment would represent a dramatic expansion of the state's financial responsibility for education and would potentially have significant effects on enrollment, particularly in higher education where tuition fees currently represent a significant barrier for many students. The fiscal implications of this commitment are enormous: the cost of providing free education at these levels would require a very substantial increase in the educational budget, far beyond the levels of the recent past.

The BNP manifesto also committed to reducing political interference in university governance, establishing merit-based processes for the appointment of academic leadership, improving research funding and facilities, and engaging with international academic institutions to strengthen Bangladesh's higher education quality. These commitments were broadly consistent with the demands of the 2024 student uprising and with the recommendations of educational experts. Their translation into practice depends on the political will to withstand the pressures of patronage politics that have historically driven educational appointments.

9.3 The 2025-2026 Educational Budget: Investment, Priorities, and Constraints

The educational budget of Bangladesh in 2025-2026 reflects both the opportunities and the constraints of the post-revolution political moment. Bangladesh continues to spend a lower proportion of GDP and government expenditure on education than most comparable countries, a structural feature of the political economy of educational investment that has persisted across governments and political changes. The aspiration to significantly increase educational investment is constrained by the overall fiscal situation, by the competing demands of other public expenditure priorities, and by the political economy of tax collection in a country with a very limited tax base.

The specific allocations within the educational budget reflect the priorities of the new government. Increased allocations for teacher salaries, reflecting the BNP's commitment to improving teacher remuneration, have been announced and partially implemented. Increased allocations for higher education research funding, also a manifesto commitment, have been announced. The allocation for the national textbook program, one of the most visible and politically popular educational investments, has been maintained.

The allocation for the 2023 curriculum reform's implementation, including teacher training and textbook revision, is more uncertain, reflecting the political uncertainty about the reform's future direction. The fiscal implications of the BNP's commitment to free education have not yet been fully costed or budgeted, and the gap between the manifesto commitment and the fiscal reality will be a defining challenge of the new government's educational term.

Chapter Ten: Comparative Political Analysis: Bangladesh in Regional and Global Context

10.1 The Political Economy of Educational Development: Comparative Lessons

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The political history of education in Bangladesh can be illuminated by comparison with the political histories of education in comparable countries. Several comparative cases are particularly instructive.

The comparison with India is closest in terms of shared historical experience, cultural context, and developmental challenge. India's educational political history since independence has been shaped by many of the same tensions that characterize Bangladesh's: between secular and religious educational traditions, between central planning and local autonomy, between quality and access, and between the interests of the educated elite and the educational rights of the poor and marginalized. India's experience with the Right to Education Act of 2009, which made free and compulsory education a fundamental right for children aged six to fourteen, offers instructive lessons for Bangladesh's own constitutional commitment to universal education. The implementation of the RTE has been partial and uneven, reflecting many of the same administrative and political challenges that characterize Bangladesh's educational reform efforts.

The comparison with Sri Lanka is also instructive. Sri Lanka achieved universal free education earlier than any other South Asian country, abolishing tuition fees and establishing free education from primary through university in 1945 under the education policy of C.W.W. Kannangara. Sri Lanka's resulting educational indicators are significantly better than Bangladesh's on most measures: literacy rates are higher, learning outcomes are better, and the quality of the educational system, while facing its own challenges, is more consistently maintained across the urban-rural divide. The Sri Lankan example demonstrates that free universal education, adequately funded and competently administered, can produce dramatically better educational outcomes than the market-supplemented, unequally funded system that Bangladesh maintains.

The comparison with Vietnam is perhaps the most instructive for Bangladesh's development aspirations. Vietnam, which has achieved remarkable educational outcomes for a relatively low-income country, provides a model of investment-driven educational improvement that is genuinely relevant to Bangladesh's situation. Vietnam's consistently strong performance in international assessments such as PISA, achieved at a fraction of the per-student expenditure of OECD countries, reflects a combination of high teacher quality, strong school leadership, a demanding curriculum with clear learning expectations, and a culture of educational effort and family engagement that has interesting parallels with, and instructive differences from, Bangladesh's educational culture.

10.2 International Educational Rights Law and Bangladesh's Obligations

Bangladesh's educational obligations under international law deserve systematic analysis that connects the political history of educational policy with the framework of international human rights. Bangladesh is a party to the principal international human rights treaties that contain educational rights provisions, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). These treaty obligations create legally binding commitments that successive Bangladeshi

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governments have formally acknowledged while implementing with varying degrees of completeness.

The ICESCR, in its Article 13, recognizes the right of everyone to education and commits states parties to making primary education compulsory and available free to all, progressively introducing free secondary and higher education, and pursuing a continuous improvement in the material conditions of teaching staff. The CRC, in its Article 28, similarly commits states parties to making primary education compulsory and available free to all, encouraging the development of different forms of secondary education, and making higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity. CEDAW, in its Article 10, commits states parties to eliminating discrimination against women in the field of education and to ensuring equal rights to education at all levels.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women have all reviewed Bangladesh's compliance with these obligations in the course of their periodic treaty body reviews. Their concluding observations have consistently identified areas of concern, including the learning crisis, the gender dimensions of educational inequality, the situation of indigenous children, and the quality of teacher training, that align with the analysis presented throughout this commentary. The committee observations provide an authoritative international perspective on the areas where Bangladesh's educational policy most significantly falls short of its international obligations.

The engagement of Bangladesh's legal system with international educational rights law is a developing area. The Supreme Court has cited international standards in some of its educational rights decisions, reflecting a growing judicial awareness of the international human rights framework. But the systematic application of international educational rights standards in domestic legal proceedings remains limited, and the gap between the formal international obligations and the operational reality of the educational system remains large.

10.3 The Washington Consensus, Post-Washington Consensus, and Bangladeshi Educational Policy

The political history of education in Bangladesh cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader history of international development economics and the changing frameworks within which international development organizations have approached educational policy. The trajectory of World Bank educational lending and policy advice, in particular, has had a profound influence on Bangladeshi educational policy across the decades examined in this Part.

The "Washington Consensus" of the 1980s and 1990s, with its emphasis on fiscal austerity, privatization, and market mechanisms, created a policy environment in which international development organizations were inclined to support private educational provision, to reduce educational subsidies, and to introduce market incentives into educational governance. In Bangladesh, this influenced the expansion of private universities under the 1992 Private University Act, the involvement of private tutoring in the supplementary education market, and various experiments with school-based management and community financing of education.

The "Post-Washington Consensus" of the late 1990s and 2000s, which placed greater emphasis on state capacity, institutional quality, and social protection, shifted the international development approach to education in directions more sympathetic to public investment, quality improvement, and equity-oriented programs. The FSSAP, the Primary Education Development Programs, and the investment in teacher training all reflected this post-Washington Consensus approach.

The most recent evolution of international development thinking on education, associated with the "learning crisis" discourse that has been prominent since the World Bank's World Development Report 2018 ("Learning to Realize Education's Promise"), emphasizes the gap between enrollment and learning outcomes and argues for a fundamental reorientation of educational investment toward improving learning quality rather than simply expanding access. This learning crisis framework has significantly influenced the direction of educational reform discussion in Bangladesh in the years since 2018, contributing to the emphasis on competency-based education and learning outcomes in the 2023 curriculum reform.

Chapter Eleven: The Future of Educational Politics in Bangladesh: Structural Challenges and Reform Possibilities

11.1 The Enduring Structural Challenges

The political history of education in Bangladesh, traced through the preceding ten chapters, reveals several enduring structural challenges that have persisted across governments, political periods, and reform initiatives, and that continue to shape the possibilities and limits of educational improvement.

The most fundamental structural challenge is the political economy of educational investment. Bangladesh's chronic under-investment in education, relative both to its own aspirations and to the standards of comparable countries, is not simply a matter of fiscal incapacity. It reflects a political economy in which the wealthy individuals and corporations who pay most taxes, and whose political influence shapes budget priorities, are disproportionately users of private education and therefore have limited direct interest in the quality of public education. The poor families whose children depend on public education pay little in taxes and have limited political influence. The result is a structural bias against educational investment that no single government has succeeded in overcoming.

The second enduring structural challenge is the politicization of educational governance. The penetration of party politics into educational institutions, from the appointment of university vice-chancellors to the allocation of teaching positions in rural schools, is a structural feature of Bangladeshi political culture that has proved remarkably resistant to reform. Each incoming government has promised to "depoliticize" education and has subsequently used educational institutions as instruments of political patronage and control. The political incentives for educational politicization are strong, and the accountability mechanisms that might constrain it are weak.

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The third enduring structural challenge is the multi-stream problem. The coexistence of the general education stream, the Madrasa stream, and the English-medium stream, each organized around different philosophical principles, serving different social communities, and leading to different social and economic outcomes, is a structural feature of the educational system that no government has succeeded in fundamentally addressing. The challenge of building a more coherent and equitable educational system while respecting the legitimate pluralism of educational philosophy and religious educational practice remains unresolved.

11.2 The Reform Possibilities of the Present Moment

And yet the political moment of 2025-2026 also presents genuine reform possibilities that deserve acknowledgment alongside the structural challenges. The 2024 revolution has disrupted the political equilibrium that had sustained the worst features of the Hasina era's educational management. The new government enters office with genuine commitments to educational reform and with at least some political space to act on those commitments.

The demand for academic freedom and merit-based university governance that was central to the 2024 uprising has genuine popular legitimacy that creates political incentives for reform in this area. The specific commitments on free education for women and improved research funding provide a basis for significant policy change if the political will and fiscal resources can be assembled.

The civil society organizations, research institutions, and educational advocacy groups that have been documenting Bangladesh's educational problems and developing reform proposals for decades are more active, better networked, and more publicly visible than at any previous moment. The Campaign for Popular Education, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, the University Grants Commission, and various teacher and student organizations represent a significant civil society infrastructure that can support and advocate for educational reform.

The international community of development organizations, while maintaining the structural limitations discussed above, brings significant technical assistance, research evidence, and financial resources to educational reform. The Global Partnership for Education, UNESCO's ongoing education programs, the World Bank's human capital project, and bilateral development partners are all engaged in supporting Bangladesh's educational reform efforts.

11.3 The Political Philosophy of Educational Reform: Rights, Justice, and Democratic Governance

The political history of education in Bangladesh ultimately raises deep questions of political philosophy about the relationship between the state and education, between democracy and educational quality, and between political power and the rights of citizens to education.

Liberal political philosophy, in the tradition of John Rawls and his successors, would argue that a just educational system is one that provides every citizen with the educational resources necessary to develop their capacities and to participate effectively in democratic life. Rawls's

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"difference principle" would evaluate educational policy by its effects on the least advantaged members of society: an educational system is just only if it distributes educational opportunity in a way that maximizes the educational resources available to the worst-off. By this standard, Bangladesh's educational system fails profoundly and consistently, providing vastly better educational resources to the already advantaged while systematically denying adequate educational opportunity to the poor, the rural, the female, the indigenous, and the disabled.

Republican political philosophy, in the tradition of Hannah Arendt, Philip Pettit, and Juergen Habermas, would emphasize the relationship between education and democratic citizenship. For republican political philosophers, education is not merely an economic investment or an individual right. It is the foundation of democratic self-governance, the means by which citizens develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that democratic life requires. A democratic state has a particular obligation to provide an education that develops the capacities of democratic citizenship, including critical thinking, civic knowledge, the ability to engage in reasoned public argument, and the disposition to participate actively in collective self-governance. Bangladesh's education system, oriented as it is toward examination performance rather than civic development, fails this republican standard as comprehensively as it fails the Rawlsian one.

Islamic political philosophy, which provides the framework within which a very large proportion of the Bangladeshi population understands political life and public ethics, has its own distinctive account of the relationship between education and the good society. Drawing on the Quranic injunction to seek knowledge, the Islamic tradition of the scholar's social responsibility, and the Islamic emphasis on education as the development of the whole person in accordance with divine guidance, an Islamic political philosophy of education would evaluate the educational system by its contribution to the formation of individuals who are both knowledgeable and righteous, both practically competent and spiritually grounded. By this standard, a system oriented toward rote memorization and examination performance at the expense of genuine understanding, ethical development, and spiritual formation, fails as seriously as it fails by liberal or republican standards.

The convergence of these diverse philosophical traditions on a common critique of Bangladesh's actual educational system is striking and important. Whatever the philosophical starting point, the conclusion is similar: the current system does not adequately serve the deepest educational aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. This philosophical convergence provides a basis for building the broad political coalition that genuine educational transformation requires, a coalition that can reach across the secular-religious divide, across the class divide, and across the partisan political divide, united by a shared commitment to the educational rights and the educational potential of Bangladesh's children.

11.4 Toward a Political Economy of Educational Transformation

The political history of education in Bangladesh suggests several lessons for those who seek to promote educational transformation. These lessons are not simply academic. They are practical guides for the political and institutional work that educational improvement requires.

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The first lesson is that educational reform requires a political coalition. No educational reform can succeed without the organized political support of groups that have sufficient social influence to sustain reform through the inevitable periods of resistance and reversal. Building this coalition requires understanding the political interests of different groups in educational outcomes and designing reform proposals that can attract broad support rather than narrow partisan constituencies.

The second lesson is that reform must address the incentive structures of the educational system, not merely its formal design. The problems of teacher absenteeism, coaching industry dominance, examination irregularity, and university politicization are all problems of incentive: they persist because the incentives facing individual actors in the educational system push in directions that are individually rational but collectively damaging. Reforming these incentive structures requires attention to the political economy of educational governance, not merely to curriculum design or pedagogical technique.

The third lesson is that implementation matters more than policy design. Bangladesh has a long history of well-designed policies that have been inadequately implemented. The investment in implementation capacity, including the training of educational administrators, the development of school leadership, the strengthening of district-level educational support systems, and the development of robust monitoring and feedback mechanisms, is at least as important as the investment in policy design.

The fourth lesson is that educational reform must be connected to broader social and economic policy. The educational system cannot succeed in producing learning and development outcomes that the broader society and economy do not support. The garment worker's daughter who attends school regularly and learns well but faces a labor market that does not value her education, that discriminates against women in access to supervisory and management roles, and that pays inadequate wages even to educated workers, has not been well-served by educational improvement alone. Educational reform must be embedded in a broader project of social and economic transformation that creates the conditions in which educational investment genuinely pays off in improved life outcomes for all Bangladesh's citizens.

Conclusion to Part Three: The Weight of Political History and the Possibility of Educational Democracy

The political history of education in Bangladesh, from the optimistic foundational moment of 1971 to the uncertain but potentially transformative present of 2026, is a history of aspirations repeatedly compromised by political interest, structural constraints, and institutional incapacity. The Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission's vision of a unified, secular, democratic, and high-quality educational system was never realized. The progressive educational nationalism of the founding period was subsequently diluted, Islamized, and politically manipulated by successive governments. The democratic transition of the 1990s opened new possibilities that were simultaneously advanced (through programs like the FSSAP) and corrupted (through the progressive politicization of educational governance). The Hasina era combined genuine

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commitment to educational expansion with an increasingly authoritarian management of educational institutions that culminated in the conditions that produced the student revolution of 2024.

And yet the persistence of educational aspiration among Bangladesh's people, the resilience of educational institutions even under severe stress, the innovation of civil society organizations like BRAC, and the revolutionary demand of a generation of young Bangladeshis for an educational system that genuinely serves their development and their dignity, all testify to a vital democratic energy that has survived the political history examined in this Part. The question for Bangladesh's educational future is whether this democratic energy can be organized and sustained in ways that produce the institutional change and the political commitment that educational transformation requires.

The answer to this question is not determined by historical necessity or by structural constraint. It is determined by political choice, by the quality of leadership and citizenship, and by the capacity of Bangladesh's diverse society to build the political will and the institutional capacity that educational transformation demands. Part Four will turn from political history to the detailed examination of curriculum and assessment, exploring the content and the evaluation of the education that Bangladesh's political history has produced and is now seeking to transform.

The thread running through all the Parts of this commentary is ultimately a simple but profound normative commitment: every child in Bangladesh deserves an education that develops her full human potential, that respects her dignity and her cultural identity, that prepares her for democratic citizenship and productive participation in a changing society, and that serves the aspirations she and her family have invested so much to pursue. The distance between this aspiration and the current reality is the measure of the work that remains to be done. The political history of education in Bangladesh is a history of that distance, and of the sometimes inspiring, sometimes tragic, never-finished effort to close it.

PART FOUR: CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY, AND THE CONTESTED ARCHITECTURE OF KNOWLEDGE

The Intellectual Core of Bangladesh's Educational System

Prologue to Part Four: The Question That Will Not Go Away

Every society, in every generation, is haunted by the same fundamental educational question: what should be taught? It is a question that sounds deceptively simple and proves, on close examination, to be one of the most philosophically complex, politically charged, and socially consequential questions that any civilization can ask of itself. What should be taught is never merely a technical matter of subject selection and sequence. It is simultaneously a philosophical claim about the nature of knowledge, a political claim about what kind of citizen the state wishes

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to produce, a cultural claim about which traditions, values, and identities deserve to be transmitted to the young, an economic claim about the kinds of skills and competencies that a particular mode of production requires, and a moral claim about what kind of human being it is good to be.

In Bangladesh, this question has been answered and re-answered, abandoned and reformulated, contested and partially resolved, across more than two centuries of educational history. The British colonial administration answered it one way. The Pakistani state answered it differently. The founding republic of 1971 attempted yet another answer. Successive governments since independence have modified, reversed, and reinvented the answer in ways that track, with remarkable fidelity, the political and ideological transformations of the state. And in the extraordinary conjuncture of 2023 to 2026, during which the most ambitious curriculum reform in Bangladesh's history was launched, bitterly contested, partially implemented, and then substantially reversed by a new government in a demonstration of how thoroughly educational policy is embedded in political power, the question has been posed with a new and urgent intensity.

Part Four examines this question from every available angle. It begins with the philosophy of curriculum, because the intellectual foundations of curriculum making must be understood before the specific choices of any particular curriculum can be adequately analyzed. It then moves through the institutional history of curriculum development in Bangladesh, the political sociology of textbook production, the extraordinary events of the 2023 curriculum reform and its aftermath, the theories of learning and pedagogy that have shaped and been shaped by Bangladesh's educational practice, the philosophy and politics of assessment, the language politics of the classroom, the specific challenge of religious education in a Muslim-majority state that aspires to modernity, the emerging challenge of digital pedagogy and artificial intelligence, the economic analysis of curriculum investment, the legal and constitutional dimensions of curriculum rights and obligations, and finally a comparative analysis that situates Bangladesh's curriculum challenges within the global and regional landscape.

The argument that runs through all of these analyses is simple but profound: curriculum is not a technical matter but a civilizational one. It is the mechanism through which a society reproduces itself, transmits its understanding of the world, and either opens or closes the minds of its children. Bangladesh has not yet settled the question of what kind of civilization it is building, and until that question is more adequately addressed, the curriculum will remain a site of conflict rather than a platform for development.

Chapter One: The Philosophy of Curriculum: From Tyler to Freire to the Constructivist Revolution

1.1 The Founding Problematic of Curriculum Theory

The formal discipline of curriculum theory emerged in the twentieth century as a response to the modernization of mass schooling, but the philosophical questions that curriculum theory

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addresses are as old as organized education itself. Plato's account of education in the Republic, which prescribes a curriculum in music, gymnastics, mathematics, and philosophy calibrated to the development of the soul toward reason and justice, is the foundational text of curriculum philosophy in the Western tradition. Ibn Rushd's commentaries on Aristotle, Al-Ghazali's Ihya Ulum al-Din (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), and Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah are foundational texts in the Islamic curriculum tradition. The Indian tradition of curriculum thought, running from the Upanishadic ashram through the elaborate pedagogical system of Nalanda to the educational philosophy of Tagore, provides yet another set of philosophical resources for thinking about what should be taught and how. Any serious engagement with curriculum theory in the context of Bangladesh must draw on these multiple traditions rather than treating Western twentieth-century curriculum theory as if it were the only available framework.

Nevertheless, the formal discipline of curriculum theory as it has developed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, primarily in the Anglo-American academic tradition but with significant contributions from continental Europe, Latin America, and increasingly from Asia and Africa, provides the conceptual vocabulary that dominates contemporary educational policy discourse globally, including in Bangladesh. Understanding this tradition, both its genuine insights and its structural limitations, is a necessary first step for any critical analysis of Bangladesh's curriculum.

The founding document of modern curriculum theory is generally taken to be Ralph Tyler's "Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction" published in 1949. Tyler's "rationale," as it has come to be known, posed curriculum making as a four-step process of sequential logical inquiry: first, determine what educational purposes the school should seek to attain; second, provide educational experiences likely to attain these purposes; third, organize these educational experiences effectively; and fourth, determine whether these purposes are being attained. This framework, while appearing self-evidently rational, smuggles in a set of philosophical assumptions that deserve critical examination.

Tyler's framework assumes that educational purposes can be clearly specified in advance, that learning experiences can be designed to produce predetermined outcomes, and that assessment can determine whether those outcomes have been achieved. This assumption reflects a particular philosophical tradition, closely associated with behaviorism in psychology and positivism in philosophy of science, that treats knowledge as an objective entity and learning as the reliable transmission of that entity from teacher to student. It is a framework that is, in the vocabulary of curriculum theory, "product-oriented" rather than "process-oriented." It treats education as the production of a measurable output rather than the cultivation of a developing person.

The appeal of the Tyler rationale for educational administrators and policymakers is obvious: it promises a rational, systematic, accountable process for curriculum making. The influence of this framework on Bangladesh's National Curriculum Framework and on the design of the 2023 curriculum reform is visible in the latter's emphasis on clearly specified competencies and measurable outcomes. But the limitations of the Tylerian framework are equally significant and have been extensively documented in curriculum theory since the 1970s.

1.2 The Reconceptualist Challenge: Curriculum as Lived Experience

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The reconceptualist movement in curriculum theory, associated most powerfully with William Pinar, Madeleine Grumet, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and their colleagues, emerged in the 1970s as a sustained philosophical critique of the Tyler rationale and the technical-rational model of curriculum making that it represented. The reconceptualists argued, on philosophical grounds drawn from phenomenology, critical theory, and psychoanalytic thought, that curriculum is not a planned set of experiences but a lived and living phenomenon, a complex of encounters, meanings, relationships, and transformations that cannot be reduced to the pre-specified outcomes of a behaviorist design model.

William Pinar's concept of "currere," drawn from the Latin root of the English word "curriculum" (a racing course), reconceived curriculum not as a course of study to be followed but as the lived intellectual and autobiographical experience of the learner. For Pinar, genuine curriculum theory requires what he calls "the method of currere": a reflective, autobiographical inquiry in which the learner examines her own past educational experiences, her present relationship to knowledge, and her imagined educational future, in a process of self-understanding that is simultaneously a process of intellectual and personal development.

This phenomenological reconception of curriculum has significant implications for the Bangladeshi context. The dominant model of curriculum in Bangladesh's general education system is thoroughly Tylerian in its structure: objectives are specified, content is selected, experiences are organized, and assessment measures outcomes. The experience of learning is not the object of inquiry; it is the mechanism for producing measured outcomes. The individual learner's autobiography, her specific cultural background, her linguistic experience, her family history, her aspirations and fears, are not resources for curriculum design but rather variables to be managed or overcome in the pursuit of standardized outcomes. The phenomenological critique asks whether a curriculum that is blind to the lived experience of the learner can actually educate, as opposed to merely train or credential.

Michael Apple's contribution to curriculum theory adds a specifically political and sociological dimension to the reconceptualist critique. Apple, drawing on the Marxist tradition and on the sociology of knowledge, asks whose knowledge gets included in the official curriculum and whose knowledge is excluded. The official curriculum of any educational system, he argues, represents the "selective tradition" of the dominant social groups, the subset of available knowledge that serves the interests of those who have the power to define educational content. Knowledge that challenges existing hierarchies, that represents the experience of subordinate groups, or that questions the dominant ideological framework, is systematically excluded from or marginalized in the official curriculum.

Apple's analysis maps with uncomfortable precision onto the curriculum politics of Bangladesh. The progressive secularist curriculum of the immediate post-independence period reflected the interests and values of the secular Bengali nationalist intellectual elite. The subsequent incorporation of Islamic content reflected the political mobilization of Muslim conservative social groups. The persistent marginalization of indigenous community knowledge, the underrepresentation of women's experience in textbook content, and the exclusion of working-class and peasant cultural knowledge from the curriculum of formal schooling, all reflect the operation of Apple's "selective tradition" in Bangladesh's specific context. The 2023 curriculum

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reform, which claimed to be departing from the selective tradition by incorporating a more diverse range of competencies and a more participatory approach to learning, was itself subject to Apple's critique: the competencies it selected as essential reflected the values of a specific technocratic and progressive elite whose vision of the "good educated person" was not universally shared.

1.3 Bloom's Taxonomy, Competency Frameworks, and the Psychological Architecture of Curriculum

The psychological dimensions of curriculum theory deserve separate treatment because they have been, if anything, even more directly influential on Bangladesh's curriculum reforms than the philosophical and sociological dimensions. The dominant psychological framework in curriculum design globally since the mid-twentieth century has been the cognitive-developmental tradition associated with Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (published in 1956 and revised in 2001) and its successors.

Benjamin Bloom and his collaborators distinguished three domains of educational objectives: the cognitive domain (knowledge and intellectual abilities), the affective domain (values, attitudes, and dispositions), and the psychomotor domain (physical skills and motor abilities). Within the cognitive domain, they identified a hierarchy of six levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (revised in 2001 to: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create). This taxonomy became, and remains, the most widely used framework for curriculum design and assessment planning in educational systems around the world, including Bangladesh.

The appeal of Bloom's taxonomy is its clarity and its seemingly straightforward applicability. It provides curriculum designers with a set of clearly differentiated cognitive objectives that can be systematically incorporated into curriculum planning, lesson design, and assessment. The criticism of Bangladesh's traditional curriculum as oriented toward the lowest levels of Bloom's taxonomy, namely memorization of factual knowledge (the "remember" level), is a standard and well-founded critique. The aspiration of the 2023 curriculum reform to develop higher-order thinking skills, namely analysis, evaluation, and creation, is explicitly a Bloomian aspiration.

But the limitations of Bloom's taxonomy as a curriculum framework deserve attention. First, the taxonomy is primarily a classification scheme rather than a theory of learning. It tells us what levels of cognitive complexity we might aim for, but it does not tell us how learning at those levels is achieved or what conditions support it. Second, the taxonomy's hierarchical structure implies that higher-order skills build on lower-order ones in a linear developmental sequence, an implication that cognitive science has not consistently supported. Third, and most importantly for the Bangladeshi context, the taxonomy's cognitive orientation gives relatively little attention to the cultural, social, and affective dimensions of learning that are crucial determinants of educational engagement and achievement, particularly in contexts where learners' cultural backgrounds are significantly different from the cultural assumptions embedded in the formal curriculum.

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Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, which describes the stages through which children's thinking develops from sensorimotor to preoperational to concrete operational to formal operational, has also been deeply influential on curriculum design globally and in Bangladesh. The Piagetian framework implies that curriculum should be designed to match the cognitive developmental level of the learner, that children in the concrete operational stage (roughly ages seven to eleven) should be taught through concrete, manipulable materials rather than abstract symbols, and that formal operational thinking (the capacity for abstract reasoning) should not be assumed in curriculum design for pre-adolescent children.

The application of Piagetian developmental psychology to curriculum design in Bangladesh raises a fascinating and largely unexplored question. Piaget's developmental stages were derived primarily from observations of middle-class Swiss children and may not translate universally to children from different cultural contexts, as cross-cultural developmental psychologists have argued since the 1970s. The work of researchers such as Michael Cole, Sylvia Scribner, and their colleagues in the LCHC (Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition) has demonstrated that cognitive development is heavily influenced by cultural practices and that the forms of reasoning that Piaget identified as developmentally advanced are precisely the forms of reasoning that are most cultivated by formal schooling. This means that using Piagetian categories to design a curriculum for children who are simultaneously navigating formal schooling and rich informal learning environments in a very different cultural context from Piaget's Swiss bourgeoisie requires greater care and cultural sensitivity than is usually displayed.

1.4 Vygotsky, Social Constructivism, and the Theory of the Zone of Proximal Development

The theoretical framework that has most explicitly shaped Bangladesh's 2023 curriculum reform is social constructivism, associated primarily with the Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) whose work, though produced in the 1920s and 1930s, was not widely available in the West until the 1960s and did not become dominant in educational theory until the 1980s and 1990s. Vygotsky's social constructivism represents a profound philosophical departure from both behaviorism and Piagetian constructivism in its insistence that learning and cognitive development are fundamentally social rather than individual processes.

Vygotsky's most influential concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he defined as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. Learning happens most effectively, in Vygotsky's account, when it occurs within the ZPD: when the learner is challenged to do something slightly beyond her current independent capability, with the support (or "scaffolding," in the terminology introduced by Jerome Bruner, who extended Vygotsky's ideas) of a more knowledgeable partner. Too easy a task produces no development; too difficult a task produces only frustration. The pedagogically skilful teacher is one who can identify each student's ZPD and provide appropriately calibrated challenge and support.

The social constructivist framework also emphasizes the role of language and cultural tools in cognitive development. For Vygotsky, language is not merely the medium through which thought is expressed but the primary tool through which thought is organized and developed.

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This means that the language of instruction has profound implications not merely for comprehension but for the development of thinking itself. A child who is learning in a language she does not yet fully command is not simply experiencing a comprehension difficulty; she is being deprived of the primary cognitive tool through which her thinking should be developing. The implications of this insight for Bangladesh's complex multilingual educational landscape, where children are taught in Bengali when their home language may be Chakma, Garo, or Sylheti, are significant and we will explore them in detail in Chapter Seven.

The influence of Vygotskian social constructivism on Bangladesh's 2023 curriculum reform is explicit in the official curriculum documents, which describe the new approach as based on "social constructivist" theory and emphasize collaborative learning, peer interaction, and the role of context in shaping learning. But the translation of social constructivist theory into classroom practice in Bangladesh faces the same structural challenges that have beset every previous attempt to modernize pedagogy: a teaching workforce that was not trained in constructivist methods, a physical infrastructure that often makes collaborative learning physically difficult, an assessment system whose demands were not fully aligned with constructivist learning goals, and a cultural tradition of teaching that is oriented toward transmission rather than facilitation.

1.5 Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Its Curriculum Implications

Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," first published in Portuguese in 1968 and in English translation in 1970, constitutes one of the most radical and most important critiques of conventional curriculum and pedagogy in the history of educational thought. Freire's critique, examined briefly in Part One of this commentary in its philosophical dimensions, has specific curriculum implications that deserve treatment in greater depth here.

Freire's central insight, as we have noted, is that the conventional model of education is a "banking" model in which the teacher deposits pre-selected knowledge into the passive student-as-receptacle. The curriculum of this banking model is not selected to serve the learner's needs or to develop the learner's critical consciousness. It is selected to serve the interests of the dominant social groups, to transmit the knowledge, values, and perspectives that reproduce the existing social order. A curriculum that teaches children that the history of their country began with colonial administration (or with the arrival of a particular religious tradition) and that the culture of the metropole (or the dominant ethnic group) is the standard of civilization, is a curriculum that performs the ideological function of reproducing the social domination of the groups whose knowledge and values it privileges.

Freire's alternative is a curriculum built on what he calls "generative themes": the real, lived concerns and conflicts of the learner's own community, identified through a process of dialogue between educators and learners. A Freirean curriculum does not begin with the curriculum designer's specification of what the student should know. It begins with the student's own experience of the world, her own contradictions and aspirations, and it uses these as the raw material for a process of critical consciousness-raising that is simultaneously a process of learning literacy, numeracy, and other formal academic skills.

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The application of Freirean curriculum principles in Bangladesh has been most successful in the context of BRAC's non-formal primary education program, which we will examine in detail in Part Eight of this commentary. BRAC's curriculum developers drew explicitly on Freirean principles in designing the non-formal curriculum, grounding the literacy and numeracy curriculum in the real-life experiences and concerns of the poor rural children and adults it served, and treating learners as active agents in their own education rather than passive recipients. The remarkable success of the BRAC non-formal program in achieving literacy outcomes superior to those of the formal system, at a fraction of the cost and in a fraction of the time, suggests that Freirean principles, thoughtfully applied in the Bangladeshi context, can produce genuine educational results. Whether and how these principles can be applied within the formal schooling system, with its different institutional dynamics and political constraints, is a more complex and less resolved question.

1.6 William Doll's Post-Modern Curriculum Theory and the Complexity Revolution

The late twentieth century brought a new wave of curriculum theorizing that drew on the philosophy of complexity, chaos theory, and post-modern thought to challenge not just the content of the Tyler rationale but its fundamental epistemological assumptions. William Doll's "A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum" (1993) is perhaps the most systematically developed of these new curriculum theories, and its arguments have particular relevance to the Bangladeshi context.

Doll argues that the Tyler rationale is built on a Newtonian, mechanistic model of the world, a model that treats reality as composed of discrete, controllable entities that behave in predictable, linear ways. In this model, a curriculum is a machine for producing predetermined learning outcomes, and the task of the curriculum designer is to specify the outcomes with sufficient precision and to design the learning experiences with sufficient care that the machine reliably delivers what it was designed to deliver. This model may be appropriate for training in specific, well-defined skills. It is profoundly inappropriate for genuine education, which is concerned with the development of mind and character in all their complexity, unpredictability, and irreducible individuality.

Drawing on complexity theory and on the educational philosophy of Dewey, Doll proposes a post-modern curriculum characterized by four qualities: richness (the capacity for multiple interpretations and connections), recursion (the opportunity for reflection on and transformation of what has been learned), relations (attention to the multiple relationships and contexts within which learning is embedded), and rigor (not the rigor of standardized measurement but the rigor of thoughtful inquiry into one's own assumptions and practices). This "four R" framework offers a more philosophically sophisticated model for curriculum design than the Tyler rationale, though it also poses significantly greater challenges for implementation in contexts with limited teacher capacity and weak professional cultures.

The relevance of Doll's post-modern curriculum theory to Bangladesh becomes apparent when we examine the 2023 curriculum reform's stated aspiration to develop "creative," "critical," and "reflective" learners. These aspirations are, in Doll's terms, aspirations toward a rich, recursive, relational curriculum. The problem, as we shall see in detail in Chapter Three, is that the

institutional conditions necessary to support such a curriculum were not created alongside the aspirations, with consequences that were both predictable and damaging.

1.7 African and Asian Contributions to Curriculum Philosophy: Ubuntu, Confucian Pedagogy, and the Limits of Eurocentric Theory

Any curriculum philosophy that claims to be adequate to the needs of Bangladesh's educational system, without engaging with non-Western philosophical traditions, is intellectually incomplete. The dominance of Eurocentric and North American curriculum theory in international educational discourse, including in Bangladesh's educational policy debates, represents a form of intellectual colonialism that has been increasingly challenged by scholars working in the African, Asian, and Latin American philosophical traditions.

The African philosophical concept of Ubuntu, often summarized in the phrase "I am because we are," offers a curriculum philosophy premised on the radical interconnectedness of the human community and the priority of communal flourishing over individual achievement. Ubuntu-based curriculum theory, developed by scholars such as Thaddeus Metz, challenges the individualist assumptions of dominant Western curriculum theory, which evaluates educational success in terms of individual achievement, individual credential acquisition, and individual competitive advantage. An Ubuntu curriculum would evaluate success in terms of the quality of relationships it develops, the capacity for communal problem-solving it cultivates, and the contribution it makes to the flourishing of the community as a whole. While the Ubuntu concept is specifically African in its cultural origins, the values it expresses have analogues in Bengali, Islamic, and broader South Asian philosophical traditions that have been underrepresented in Bangladesh's curriculum discourse.

The Confucian educational tradition, which has shaped the curriculum philosophies of China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and the ethnic Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, offers a different set of resources. Confucian pedagogy emphasizes the cultivation of virtue through disciplined study and practice, the responsibility of the learned person to serve the community and the state, the importance of the teacher-student relationship as a moral as well as an intellectual bond, and the role of classical texts in transmitting the civilizational wisdom of the tradition. The striking educational successes of East Asian educational systems, which are heavily influenced by Confucian values, have generated a significant literature on "Confucian Heritage Culture" and its relationship to educational achievement. While Bangladesh's cultural context is fundamentally different from the Confucian East Asian context, the Confucian emphasis on the disciplined cultivation of virtue and learning has resonances with both Islamic educational philosophy and with the Bengali intellectual tradition that deserve more attention than they have received in curriculum debates.

The Bengali intellectual tradition itself, as expressed in the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore (discussed in Part One), offers curriculum resources that are simultaneously rooted in Bangladesh's specific cultural heritage and philosophically sophisticated in their engagement with the global educational tradition. Tagore's emphasis on learning through experience, on the integration of art, music, and nature study into the curriculum, on the importance of the learner's emotional and spiritual development alongside cognitive development, and on the need for

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curriculum to be rooted in the specific landscape and culture of the region, provides a genuinely indigenous curriculum philosophy that is not simply a Bengali version of Western progressivism. The consistent failure to seriously incorporate Tagoreian curriculum philosophy into Bangladesh's educational reform debates is a significant intellectual impoverishment that this commentary aims to partially address.

Chapter Two: The National Curriculum and Textbook Board: Institution, Power, and the Politics of Knowledge Production

2.1 The Institutional History of Curriculum Making in Bangladesh

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), established in 1983 under the NCTB Ordinance, is the central institution of Bangladesh's curriculum development and textbook production system. Understanding the NCTB as an institution, its organizational culture, its political environment, its professional capacity, and its historical record, is essential for understanding why Bangladesh's curriculum development has followed the trajectory it has and why curriculum reform in Bangladesh is so much more difficult to achieve in practice than in policy aspiration.

The NCTB's institutional mandate is enormous in scope. It is responsible for developing curricula and syllabi for all levels of the general education system from pre-primary through higher secondary; for developing and publishing textbooks based on those curricula; for conducting research on curriculum and textbook quality; and for coordinating with the various educational boards and the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education on the implementation of curricula and assessments. This mandate covers approximately forty million students enrolled in tens of thousands of institutions, making the NCTB one of the most consequential curriculum institutions in Asia in terms of the sheer scale of its impact.

The scale of the NCTB's mandate has always been in tension with the institutional capacity available to discharge it. For much of its history, the NCTB has been chronically understaffed in terms of professional curriculum developers, editors, and educational researchers. The most serious constraint on its professional capacity is the quality of the technical staff available for curriculum and textbook development. Curriculum development is a sophisticated professional practice that requires deep subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical expertise, understanding of developmental psychology, familiarity with international curriculum research, and the ability to translate all of this expertise into curriculum documents, syllabi, and textbooks that are both educationally sound and practically usable by teachers with varying levels of qualification and preparation. The NCTB has not consistently been able to recruit and retain staff with this combination of skills.

The organizational culture of the NCTB reflects the broader culture of Bangladeshi public bureaucracy: hierarchical, risk-averse, oriented toward process compliance rather than outcome achievement, and vulnerable to political interference. Curriculum decisions that should be made on educational and pedagogical grounds are frequently made on political grounds: which content

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is politically acceptable given the current government's ideological orientation, which authors and textbook writers are politically connected and therefore likely to receive commissions, which educational approaches are favored by the current international donors and therefore eligible for donor financing. These political considerations shape the curriculum in ways that are not transparent and that often override educational considerations.

2.2 The Political Economy of Textbook Production

Bangladesh's system of centralized textbook production and free distribution is one of the most ambitious public educational programs in the developing world. The annual distribution of several hundred million free textbooks to students at all levels of the general education and Madrasa systems is a genuine logistical achievement and a powerful demonstration of the state's capacity for large-scale public goods delivery. The political economy of this system, however, deserves careful analysis, because the process of textbook production is a site of significant political and economic conflict.

The production of textbooks is awarded through a procurement process that has been consistently identified as a source of corruption and irregularity. The printing contracts for Bangladesh's national textbooks represent very large sums of money, and the competition for these contracts has historically been shaped by political connections as well as by commercial competitiveness. Printing firms with political links to the governing party have consistently received favorable treatment in contract allocation, while technically superior but politically unconnected firms have been disadvantaged. This corruption in textbook procurement has consequences for textbook quality: firms that win contracts through political favor may lack the technical capacity to produce textbooks of consistently high quality, and the absence of rigorous quality control in the procurement process compounds this problem.

The content of textbooks is equally contested political terrain. Bangladesh's national textbooks are read by tens of millions of children every year, and their content is therefore a mechanism of mass ideological formation of extraordinary reach and power. Every government since independence has used the textbook production process to embed its preferred ideological content into the national curriculum. The secular Bengali nationalist content of the textbooks produced in the immediate post-independence period was progressively modified under subsequent governments to incorporate Islamic content, to modify the framing of the Liberation War narrative, and to reflect the changing ideological priorities of the political leadership.

The textbook controversies of the Hasina era, particularly the controversies over religious content in primary school textbooks that erupted in 2017, illustrate the depth and intensity of this political conflict. The 2017 controversy was triggered by the discovery that the new primary school textbooks contained content drawn from Hindu literary tradition alongside content from Islamic tradition. Conservative Islamic political groups, led by Hefazat-e-Islam, mounted a major political campaign against what they characterized as the contamination of the Islamic educational environment by non-Islamic content. The government, despite its secular nationalist positioning, ultimately capitulated to this pressure and removed or modified the contested content in subsequent editions of the textbooks. This episode was, and is, a revealing

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demonstration of the limits of government autonomy in curriculum matters when faced with organized religious political mobilization.

2.3 Textbook Content Analysis: What Children in Bangladesh Actually Learn

A rigorous content analysis of Bangladesh's national textbooks across different periods reveals patterns that are philosophically significant and politically instructive. Several systematic analyses have been conducted by researchers at BRAC's Institute of Governance and Development, at the University of Dhaka's Institute of Education and Research, and by international researchers, that document the content, framing, and representation patterns of the textbooks used in Bangladesh's general education system.

These analyses consistently find several patterns. First, the representation of women in textbook content has historically been limited and stereotyped. Women appear in textbooks primarily in domestic roles, as mothers, wives, and daughters, rather than as professional actors, public figures, or historical agents. While this representation has improved somewhat in more recent editions, it remains significantly below the representation of women's actual social roles in Bangladesh's increasingly gender-diverse economy. Second, the representation of religious minorities in textbook content is limited and often tokenistic. Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist communities, which constitute approximately nine to ten percent of Bangladesh's population, are insufficiently represented in the narratives, examples, and illustrations of textbook content. Third, the content related to indigenous communities is minimal and often inaccurate, reflecting the educational establishment's limited understanding of and engagement with the cultural realities of indigenous Bangladeshis.

The philosophical implications of these representation patterns connect directly with the work of curriculum theorists like Michael Apple and bell hooks. A curriculum that systematically underrepresents or misrepresents the experience of specific social groups does not merely reflect existing inequalities. It actively reproduces them by signaling to children from those groups that their experience is not educationally significant, and by reinforcing in children from majority groups the assumption that their perspective is the universal one.

2.4 The NCTB's Research Capacity and International Benchmarking

One of the NCTB's most significant institutional limitations has been its limited capacity for curriculum research and for systematic engagement with international curriculum developments. A curriculum development institution that aspires to produce world-class educational materials should be continuously engaged with the international literature on curriculum theory, learning science, and comparative education. It should be conducting or commissioning research on the effectiveness of existing curricula, the learning outcomes achieved by students, the pedagogical challenges faced by teachers in implementing the curriculum, and the changes in the labor market, social context, and technological environment that should inform curriculum revision.

The NCTB has not, for most of its history, been structured or resourced to perform this research function adequately. Its orientation has been primarily toward production (of curriculum documents and textbooks) rather than research (on the effectiveness of what is produced). This

production orientation is understandable given the enormous scale of its production responsibilities, but it has meant that the institution has accumulated relatively little systematic knowledge about whether its curricula are achieving their stated objectives or how they could be improved on the basis of evidence.

The international benchmarking of Bangladesh's curriculum against comparable countries in the region and globally is an important exercise that should be a routine function of the NCTB but has been conducted only intermittently and incompletely. PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), the OECD's international assessment program, does not currently include Bangladesh as a participant, although neighboring countries including India (through some states), Vietnam, and Thailand participate. The absence of Bangladesh from these international assessments means that the country lacks a systematic external benchmark for the learning outcomes achieved by its students. The SAQMEC (Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality) and the PASEC (Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems) assessments in Africa, and the PASEC's expansion toward South Asia, represent frameworks for international benchmarking that Bangladesh could and should engage with more actively.

Chapter Three: The 2023 Curriculum Reform: Vision, Ambition, and the Anatomy of Contested Change

3.1 The Origins of the Reform: From NCF 2012 to the New Curriculum Framework

The 2023 curriculum reform, which represented the most comprehensive rethinking of Bangladesh's general education curriculum since independence, had its intellectual origins in the National Curriculum Framework of 2012 and in the growing body of international and domestic evidence that Bangladesh's traditional curriculum was failing to develop the competencies required for twenty-first century life and work. The 2012 NCF had articulated a vision of competency-based education, but its implementation had been limited by inadequate teacher training, examination system inertia, and the political turbulence of the 2013 to 2018 period.

By the late 2010s, the case for more fundamental curriculum reform had accumulated significant force. International assessments consistently showed that Bangladesh's students, while enrolling in school in very large numbers, were not achieving the levels of literacy, numeracy, and analytical competence that comparable countries were achieving. The "learning crisis," documented in BRAC's Annual Primary School Census, in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Bangladesh, and in various World Bank analyses, showed that millions of children were completing primary school without achieving functional literacy or numeracy. The conventional curriculum's emphasis on content transmission and rote memorization was being increasingly identified, both by domestic educationists and by international experts, as a primary contributor to this learning crisis.

The reform was also driven by a specific vision of Bangladesh's developmental future articulated by the Hasina government. The "Smart Bangladesh" vision, an evolution of the earlier "Digital

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Bangladesh" framework, called for the development of an economy that was technologically sophisticated, innovation-driven, and globally competitive. This developmental vision implied a specific kind of educated workforce: workers who were not merely literate and numerate but who could think critically, solve complex problems, communicate effectively, collaborate productively, and adapt to rapidly changing technological and economic conditions. The existing curriculum was widely seen as inadequate to produce this workforce.

3.2 The Philosophical Architecture of the New Curriculum

The new curriculum framework, officially titled the "National Curriculum Framework 2021" and implemented from 2023, was built on a philosophical architecture that represented a genuine and significant departure from Bangladesh's curricular tradition. It is worth examining this philosophical architecture carefully, because understanding what the reform aspired to achieve is a necessary prerequisite to analyzing why its implementation was so contested.

The NCF 2021 articulated ten core competencies that all graduates of the twelve-year school cycle should develop: effective communication, critical and creative thinking, problem-solving and decision-making, knowledge of self and society, religious and moral values, family and social relationships, entrepreneurship and work, digital and technological skills, aesthetic and cultural sensitivity, and environmental awareness. These competencies were drawn from a careful synthesis of international competency frameworks, including the OECD's "Education 2030" framework with its emphasis on "transformative competencies" (creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility), UNESCO's "four pillars of education" (learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be), and the World Economic Forum's skills framework for the "fourth industrial revolution."

The philosophical assumptions embedded in this competency architecture deserve examination. The framework reflects a vision of the educated person that is simultaneously humanistic (in its emphasis on self-knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and moral development), instrumental (in its emphasis on entrepreneurship, digital skills, and work-readiness), and civic (in its emphasis on social relationships and environmental responsibility). It is an ambitious vision, and one that is broadly consistent with the best international thinking about what twenty-first century education should aim to achieve.

But the competency framework also contains implicit philosophical commitments that were not universally shared and that generated significant controversy. The emphasis on entrepreneurship as a core educational competency reflects a specific ideological commitment to market-oriented economic development that not all educationists or citizens share. The framing of religious and moral values as one competency among ten, rather than as the foundational purpose of education, was deeply unsatisfying to the Islamic educational tradition represented by Madrasa educators and conservative Muslim communities, for whom the formation of the religiously observant and morally virtuous person is not one educational goal among others but the supreme educational purpose. And the framework's overall orientation toward the production of a specific kind of internationally competitive, technologically adept, economically productive citizen can be read, through a Freirean lens, as a sophisticated version of the banking model in which the currency being deposited is not factual knowledge but marketable skills.

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3.3 The Assessment Revolution and Its Consequences

One of the most radical and most controversial aspects of the 2023 curriculum reform was its reconceptualization of student assessment. The reform abolished public examinations at the primary and junior secondary levels (the PEC and JSC examinations that had been introduced in the 2000s and had become, despite their brief existence, deeply embedded in the examination culture). It reduced the number of subjects examined in the SSC examination. And it introduced a system of continuous classroom-based assessment, including project work, group activities, peer assessment, and self-assessment, as the primary mechanism for evaluating student learning from the earliest grades.

This assessment revolution was both philosophically justified and practically problematic. The philosophical justification was strong. The elimination of high-stakes examinations at the primary and junior secondary levels addressed a widely criticized feature of Bangladesh's educational system: the subjection of young children to the psychological pressure of high-stakes standardized tests at ages ten and thirteen, at points in their development when such pressure is both educationally counterproductive and psychologically harmful. The introduction of more diverse assessment methods was consistent with international best practice in educational assessment and with the constructivist learning theory that underpinned the new curriculum.

The practical problems were equally substantial. Secondary teachers were given only a two-hour-long online curriculum dissemination training The Daily Star at the time of the reform's introduction, which is manifestly inadequate preparation for implementing a fundamentally different approach to teaching and assessment. Teachers who had been trained in, and had practiced for years, a transmission-oriented pedagogy directed toward written examination preparation were being asked to implement a facilitative, project-based, continuously assessed curriculum without the professional development necessary to make this transition. The results were predictable: teachers continued, in many cases, to teach in the ways they had always taught, while performing the formal requirements of the new assessment system (filling in assessment forms, completing project documentation) in ways that were procedurally compliant but educationally hollow.

Parents, whose understanding of educational quality was organized around examination results, found the new assessment system opaque and untrustworthy. The new curriculum was competency-based, leaving no room for evaluations through written tests. Dhaka Tribune For families who had organized their entire understanding of their children's educational progress around examination grades, this removal of familiar assessment signals was deeply disorienting. The question they could not answer was: how do I know if my child is learning? The coaching industry, whose business model was entirely predicated on examination preparation, was destabilized by reforms that reduced the number and scope of examinations. This destabilization created a powerful lobby of economic interests opposed to the new curriculum.

3.4 Textbook Controversies and the Religious Politics of the New Curriculum

The 2023 curriculum's new textbooks generated a level of public controversy that the reform architects had not fully anticipated and for which they were not adequately prepared. The

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controversies took several forms. The most politically consequential was the objection by conservative Islamic groups, led by Hefazat-e-Islam, to content in the new textbooks that they characterized as contradicting Islamic teaching. Specifically, the new textbooks' incorporation of evolutionary theory in biology, the inclusion of literary content from authors associated with Hindu tradition, and the treatment of human origins in a way that did not explicitly endorse the Quranic account, were identified as sources of objection by religious conservatives.

The political dynamics of these controversies are instructive. Hefazat-e-Islam, which had already demonstrated its political influence in the 2013 mass mobilization that had forced significant concessions from the Hasina government on the curriculum of religious education, mounted a sustained campaign against specific elements of the new textbooks. This campaign found resonance not only among the Madrasa-educated constituency that Hefazat directly represents but also among a broader conservative Muslim public that is uncomfortable with what it perceives as the secularizing thrust of the new curriculum.

The government's response to these controversies was more conciliatory than its secular nationalist positioning might have suggested. Several textbooks were withdrawn for revision, and some content identified as objectionable was modified. This pattern of concession to organized religious pressure, which has recurred consistently across the political history analyzed in Part Three of this commentary, reflects the structural political power of conservative Islamic mobilization in Bangladesh's democratic system and the corresponding limits on any government's ability to maintain a secular educational curriculum against organized political opposition.

The philosophical implications of these textbook controversies are profound. They reveal a deep and unresolved tension between two incompatible conceptions of the purpose of national education. The secular modernist conception, which underpins the 2023 curriculum reform, holds that the national curriculum should provide a shared, rationally grounded, empirically informed education that equips all children for participation in a modern, pluralistic society and a competitive global economy, regardless of their religious commitments. The Islamic traditionalist conception holds that the national curriculum should be consistent with and supportive of the Islamic faith of the Muslim majority, that it should not present knowledge claims that contradict Islamic teaching, and that the formation of the morally and spiritually virtuous Muslim is a purpose of national education that cannot be subordinated to secular developmental goals.

These two conceptions are not easily reconcilable. The attempt to build a curriculum that serves both simultaneously produces precisely the instability and contestation that the 2023 reform experienced. This is not a problem that better curriculum design can solve. It is a philosophical and political problem that requires a more fundamental social negotiation about the purposes and values of national education than Bangladesh has yet undertaken.

Chapter Four: The 2025 Reversal: Interim Government, Curriculum Politics, and the Question of Educational Continuity

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4.1 The August 2024 Revolution and Its Educational Aftermath

The student-led mass uprising of July and August 2024 that brought down Sheikh Hasina's government was, as Part Three of this commentary documents in detail, simultaneously a political revolution and an educational one. The students who led the movement against the quota system in government jobs were themselves products of Bangladesh's educational system, and their mobilization drew on the specific social experiences, grievances, and solidarities that the educational system had produced. The revolution's aftermath created a new political environment that had immediate and far-reaching consequences for the educational system.

The interim government that came to power under the Nobel laureate economist Muhammad Yunus faced an educational system in considerable turmoil. The 2023 curriculum reform, which had been a signature achievement of the Hasina government, was under sustained attack from multiple directions: from religious conservatives who objected to its content, from parents who were confused by its assessment system, from teachers who were unprepared to implement it, from political opponents who associated it with the discredited Awami League government, and from a significant body of educationists who had principled objections to specific aspects of its design and implementation. The interim government was under pressure to demonstrate a clean break with the Hasina educational legacy while simultaneously maintaining continuity in the provision of basic educational services to tens of millions of students.

4.2 The Decision to Revert: Political Logic and Educational Consequences

The Interim Government's decision to revert to the 2012 curriculum in January 2025 underscores the dynamic nature of education reform in Bangladesh. UNFPA-Bangladesh This decision, announced by the Ministry of Education in December 2024 and implemented for the academic year 2025, represented a significant reversal of course that had both educational rationale and political motivation.

The educational rationale for the reversal drew on several serious criticisms of the 2023 curriculum's implementation. Teacher training had been manifestly inadequate, and the continuous assessment system had not been implemented with the consistency or quality that it required. The new textbooks had been produced under time pressure and had quality problems that independent educational assessment had documented. The abolition of examinations at the primary and junior secondary levels had created assessment gaps that were contributing to uncertainty about student learning progress. And the disruption of the final year of the Hasina government, culminating in the political upheaval of mid-2024, had severely interrupted the implementation process.

In the wake of the political change, the default position of the government has been to discard the work on the new curriculum initiated by the previous regime, which had been under heavy criticism from educationists, teachers, and parents since its inception in 2021. The Daily Star

The political motivation for the reversal was equally powerful. The 2023 curriculum had become politically identified with the Awami League government and with Sheikh Hasina specifically. For the interim government and the political forces that supported it, including the BNP and the

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Jamaat-e-Islami who had been out of power for fifteen years, the 2023 curriculum was not a neutral educational program but a political artifact of the previous regime. Reversing it was a signal to their supporters that the new political order had taken power and was dismantling the Awami League's legacy.

The consequences of the reversal for educational continuity were significant. Textbooks for the school year 2025 have been printed according to the old syllabus. The old system of secondary-level three-way arts-science-commerce separation starting from class 9, which had been deferred to class 11, has now been restored. The Daily Star For students who had already spent one or two years under the new curriculum, this reversal created genuine discontinuities in their educational experience. Teachers who had begun to adapt to the new curriculum, however inadequately, were now required to revert to the old one. The educational disruption caused by this reversal was substantial, and the students who bore its costs were precisely those who had the least power to resist: the children in government schools across Bangladesh.

4.3 The 2025 Curriculum Review: Toward a New Framework

The reversion to the 2012 curriculum was explicitly described by the interim government as a transitional measure pending a comprehensive review of the curriculum by a new commission. Work on curriculum and learning content undertaken in 2025 is likely to be reflected in the academic year 2026 and beyond. The Daily Star The interim government established a curriculum review committee that was tasked with developing a new framework that would address the legitimate criticisms of the 2023 curriculum while preserving its genuine innovations and incorporating new perspectives consistent with the post-2024 political environment.

The composition and work of this curriculum review committee raises important questions about the governance of curriculum development. The committee's membership reflects the political priorities of the interim government: it includes representatives of the Madrasa educational community, civil society organizations critical of the Hasina government's educational policies, and international educational experts whose perspectives align with the current government's preferences. The perspectives of the teachers and educators who were in the process of implementing the 2023 curriculum, and who had invested professional effort in that implementation, are less prominently represented. This selective inclusion and exclusion of voices in the curriculum review process is itself a political act that will shape the character of the new framework.

Several important curriculum questions await resolution in this review process. First, what approach to student assessment will the new framework adopt? The binary choice between high-stakes written examinations and the continuous project-based assessment of the 2023 curriculum does not exhaust the available options, and a more nuanced approach that combines elements of both in ways that are both educationally sound and practically implementable deserves serious development. Second, what will be the relationship between the general curriculum and the Madrasa curriculum? The pressure from conservative Islamic political forces for greater incorporation of Islamic content into the general curriculum, and for greater state support for the Qawmi Madrasa system, will be a central feature of curriculum politics under the post-2024 political dispensation. Third, how will the curriculum address the digital and technological

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transformation of the economy and society? The 2023 curriculum's strong emphasis on digital literacy and technology education was one of its genuinely important features, and its wholesale reversal would be an educational mistake regardless of the political motivations for the reversal.

4.4 The Jurisprudence of Curriculum Change: Legal Constraints and Constitutional Obligations

The frequency and rapidity of curriculum change in Bangladesh raises important questions of administrative and constitutional law that deserve attention. From a jurisprudential perspective, each curriculum revision creates new legal relationships: between the state and its obligation to provide quality education, between the textbook board and the students who rely on its products, and between the education system and the teachers who are trained in and committed to specific pedagogical approaches.

Article 17 of the Constitution, as analyzed in Part Three, establishes the state's obligation to provide universal, uniform, and quality education. The repeated revision of the curriculum, each time creating transitional disruption that particularly harms the most vulnerable students, raises the question of whether curriculum instability constitutes a violation of this constitutional obligation. The state's obligation to provide not merely schooling but quality education implies an obligation to maintain sufficient curriculum stability that teachers can develop genuine pedagogical expertise, that students can build coherent educational careers, and that families can develop reasonable expectations about educational processes and outcomes.

The legal framework governing the NCTB's mandate also requires analysis. The NCTB Ordinance of 1983 gives the NCTB responsibility for curriculum development and textbook production, but it does not establish clear procedural requirements for the process of curriculum revision, including requirements for public consultation, impact assessment, teacher preparation, or transition planning. The absence of these procedural requirements in the legal framework means that curriculum revision can be, and has been, conducted without the systematic stakeholder engagement, evidence-based planning, and professional preparation that effective curriculum change requires. A legal reform of the NCTB's mandate to incorporate these procedural requirements would represent an important governance improvement that could help to prevent the cycle of hasty reform and hasty reversal that has characterized Bangladesh's curriculum history.

Chapter Five: Theories of Learning and Their Application to Bangladesh's Classroom Reality

5.1 The Learning Sciences and Their Relevance to Bangladesh

The learning sciences, an interdisciplinary field that draws on cognitive psychology, educational neuroscience, developmental psychology, and educational research, have produced in the past three decades an increasingly well-grounded body of knowledge about how learning occurs and what conditions support it. This body of knowledge, while developed primarily in research

contexts in high-income countries, has important implications for the design and delivery of education in Bangladesh, and its systematic application to the challenges of Bangladesh's educational system remains a significant underdeveloped potential.

The foundational insight of the learning sciences is that learning is an active process of construction rather than a passive process of reception. This insight, associated with the constructivist tradition from Piaget through Vygotsky to the contemporary learning scientists, means that students learn most effectively when they are actively engaged with material, when they are constructing their own understanding through interaction with problems, concepts, and other learners, and when they receive feedback that helps them identify and correct their misconceptions. Passive listening to teacher exposition, copying notes, and memorizing information for examination, are the least effective learning strategies from a cognitive science perspective, even though they are precisely the dominant modes of classroom interaction in Bangladesh's schools.

Cognitive load theory, developed by John Sweller and elaborated by Fred Paas and Jeroen van Merrienboer, offers a particularly important framework for thinking about curriculum design and pedagogy in Bangladesh's context. The theory distinguishes between three types of cognitive load: intrinsic load (the inherent difficulty of the material being learned), extraneous load (the cognitive demands created by poorly designed instruction), and germane load (the cognitive effort devoted to schema formation and learning). Effective instruction minimizes extraneous load and optimizes germane load. Many of the pedagogical practices common in Bangladesh's schools, including overly dense textbooks with insufficient examples and scaffolding, rapid pacing through large amounts of content, and assessment practices that test the recall of large quantities of information rather than the application of deeper conceptual understanding, create high extraneous load that reduces the cognitive resources available for genuine learning.

The application of cognitive load theory to the design of Bangladesh's textbooks and assessment instruments is an area of genuine research and development opportunity. Several Bangladeshi researchers, working in collaboration with international partners at institutions including the BRAC Institute of Educational Development and the University of Dhaka's Institute of Education and Research, have begun to apply learning science insights to the specific conditions of Bangladesh's classrooms. This work represents a promising and underinvested research frontier.

5.2 Spaced Repetition, Retrieval Practice, and the Science of Long-Term Learning

Among the most robust findings of cognitive psychology as applied to education are the "desirable difficulties" identified by Robert Bjork and colleagues: the learning conditions that are more effortful for the learner in the short term but that produce substantially better long-term retention and transfer. The two most thoroughly documented of these desirable difficulties are spaced repetition (distributing practice over time rather than concentrating it in a single session) and retrieval practice (the act of attempting to retrieve information from memory, which strengthens the memory trace more effectively than rereading).

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The implications of these findings for Bangladesh's educational practice are significant but have been rarely applied. Bangladesh's traditional pedagogy, organized around the coverage of large amounts of content in preparation for point-in-time examinations, is actually the opposite of what spaced repetition and retrieval practice principles recommend. Students cram intensively for examinations, achieving short-term retention sufficient to perform on the test, and then rapidly forget the material after the examination is past. This pattern of "cramming and forgetting," which the anthropology of Bangladesh's examination culture (analyzed in Part Two) so vividly documents, is not a cultural deficiency but a rational response to an assessment system that rewards short-term recall rather than long-term learning.

A curriculum and assessment system redesigned on the basis of spaced repetition and retrieval practice principles would look quite different from both Bangladesh's traditional system and from the 2023 reform's emphasis on project work and continuous assessment. It would involve regular, low-stakes retrieval practice throughout the academic year, spaced review of previously covered material, and assessment instruments designed to measure long-term retention and application rather than immediate recall. Such a system would also be more equitable: the learning benefits of spaced repetition and retrieval practice do not depend on access to private tutoring or coaching, and so a curriculum organized on these principles would potentially reduce rather than amplify the advantage that wealthier families currently derive from supplementary education.

5.3 Motivation Theory, Self-Determination, and the Bangladesh Classroom

The psychology of motivation is a crucial but often neglected dimension of educational analysis. Students who are intrinsically motivated to learn, who engage with educational material because they find it genuinely interesting, meaningful, and satisfying, learn more effectively and persistently than students who are only extrinsically motivated by examination grades, parental pressure, or the prospect of material reward. Self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan and elaborated by their colleagues over several decades, provides the most comprehensive and empirically grounded account of motivation in educational contexts currently available.

SDT distinguishes three fundamental psychological needs that must be satisfied for intrinsic motivation to develop and persist: competence (the need to feel effective in one's activities), autonomy (the need to feel that one is the author of one's own actions and choices), and relatedness (the need to feel connected to others and to care about them and to be cared for by them). Educational environments that satisfy these three needs support the development of intrinsic motivation and genuine engagement; environments that undermine them produce the kind of passive, externally driven, examination-focused engagement that characterizes so much of Bangladesh's educational culture.

The application of self-determination theory to Bangladesh's educational system produces a damning analysis. The examination-dominated, teacher-directed, competitively ranked educational environment that characterizes Bangladesh's schools at the secondary level is almost precisely calibrated to undermine all three psychological needs identified by SDT. Students' sense of competence is undermined by a curriculum that covers far more content than most

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students can genuinely understand and master, meaning that the experience of learning is chronically one of partial understanding and inadequate performance. Their sense of autonomy is undermined by a curriculum and examination system that offers no choices, no pathways differentiated by interest or aptitude, and no opportunities for students to direct their own learning. Their sense of relatedness is undermined by the competitive dynamics of the examination system, in which other students are rivals rather than collaborators.

The 2023 curriculum reform's emphasis on collaborative learning, project work, and continuous assessment was, from a self-determination theory perspective, a step in the right direction: these approaches potentially support all three psychological needs. The challenge, as always, is implementation. A group project assignment that is poorly designed and inadequately supervised produces none of the motivational benefits of genuine collaborative work. It produces frustration, free-riding, and the simulation of collaboration without its substance.

5.4 The Neuroscience of Learning, Stress, and the Bangladesh Examination Experience

Educational neuroscience, which applies the tools of cognitive neuroscience to questions of educational relevance, has produced important findings about the effects of stress on learning and memory. The findings are relevant to Bangladesh with particular urgency. Chronic stress, of the kind generated by high-stakes examination pressure, has been consistently shown to impair the cognitive functions most important for higher-order learning: working memory capacity, executive function, and the consolidation of long-term memories. The stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline, released in response to perceived threat, disrupt the hippocampal consolidation processes that are necessary for transforming short-term memory into long-term learning. The child who is chronically anxious about examination failure is, neurologically speaking, a child whose capacity for learning is being systematically impaired by the conditions of the educational environment.

The neurological analysis converges with the psychological and sociological analyses presented elsewhere in this commentary to produce a consistent indictment of Bangladesh's examination culture: it is not merely psychologically distressing and socially inequitable. It is neurologically counterproductive, creating the conditions under which genuine learning is most difficult to achieve while demanding the evidence of learning through exactly the mechanism (high-stakes, high-pressure, point-in-time written examination) that most reliably activates the stress responses that impair cognition.

Mary Helen Immordino-Yang's work on the neuroscience of emotion and learning adds another dimension to this analysis. Immordino-Yang has argued, on the basis of neurological research, that emotion is not a distraction from rational learning but its foundation: the emotional significance of material is what determines whether it is encoded in long-term memory, and learning that is emotionally meaningful to the learner is far better retained and more effectively transferred than learning that is emotionally neutral or negative. A curriculum that is presented in ways that are emotionally irrelevant to the learner's life, or that is associated with the negative emotions of examination anxiety, produces the worst possible neurological conditions for deep and lasting learning. A curriculum designed on Immordino-Yang's principles would ground

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every significant learning experience in emotional relevance, connecting academic content to the lived concerns and passions of the learner.

Chapter Six: The Pedagogy of Examinations: Assessment Theory, Practice, and the Crisis of Measurement

6.1 The Theory of Educational Assessment: What Are We Actually Measuring?

Educational assessment is, in principle, a process of gathering information about what students have learned in order to support further learning and to make valid inferences about educational achievement. In practice, particularly in Bangladesh's context, assessment has become something quite different: a social sorting mechanism that determines life trajectories, allocates social resources, and creates the framework of competition and anxiety that dominates educational culture. Understanding the gap between the theory and the practice of assessment in Bangladesh requires engaging with the sophisticated body of assessment theory that has been developed over the past half-century.

The seminal work of Lee Cronbach on validity, reliability, and generalizability in educational measurement established the foundational framework within which assessment theory has subsequently developed. For Cronbach, validity is the central concept: an assessment is valid to the extent that the inferences drawn from it are justified by the evidence it provides. An examination that purports to measure "critical thinking" but actually measures the memorization of content is not a valid assessment of critical thinking, regardless of its reliability (consistency of measurement). The question of validity is particularly acute in Bangladesh, where public examinations purport to measure the educational achievements specified in the curriculum but, as extensive research has documented, actually measure primarily the ability to reproduce curriculum-specified content under time pressure, a competency that is not the same as and is often inversely related to the deeper understanding and analytical capacity that the curriculum claims to develop.

Dylan Wiliam's influential framework for formative assessment is relevant here. Wiliam distinguishes between summative assessment (assessment of learning, conducted at the end of an instructional period to determine what has been achieved) and formative assessment (assessment for learning, conducted during the instructional process to provide feedback that guides further learning). The two types of assessment serve different functions and require different design principles. Wiliam's research, synthesized with the work of Paul Black and colleagues in the "Inside the Black Box" research program, has consistently found that high-quality formative assessment, characterized by specific, actionable feedback on learning processes rather than global evaluative judgments about performance, is one of the most powerful interventions available for improving learning outcomes. This finding is relevant to Bangladesh because the most urgent reform need is not the replacement of summative examinations with project-based assessment (the 2023 curriculum's approach) but the development of high-quality formative assessment practices within the classroom, something that requires sophisticated teacher professional development rather than curriculum revision.

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6.2 The Standard-Setting Challenge: Cut Scores, Grade Inflation, and the Inflation of Credentials

One of the most striking features of Bangladesh's examination system in recent decades is the phenomenon of grade inflation: the consistent increase in examination pass rates and high-grade percentages that has been documented across the SSC and HSC examinations over the past two decades. When grade inflation is understood not as an educational achievement but as a systematic shift in the standard against which student performance is measured, its significance for educational quality becomes clearer.

The data are striking. The pass rate for the SSC examination has increased from approximately sixty percent in the early 2000s to over ninety percent in some recent years. The proportion of students achieving GPA 5 (the highest grade point average) has similarly increased dramatically. These increases have occurred during a period in which the quality of classroom instruction, the preparation of teachers, and the learning outcomes of students (as measured by independent research) have not consistently improved. The inference that the examination standards have declined is difficult to avoid.

Grade inflation creates a paradox: it appears to represent educational achievement while actually representing educational failure. A system in which ninety percent of students pass the SSC examination but in which a substantial proportion of SSC graduates are functionally illiterate or innumerate (as BRAC and other research consistently finds) is a system that is producing credentials without learning, certification without competence. The economic consequences of this credential inflation are significant: employers discover that SSC and HSC certificates provide little reliable information about applicants' actual skills and knowledge, which devalues the credential and forces the development of alternative assessment mechanisms (such as separate employer testing) that add cost and uncertainty to the labor market. The social consequences are also significant: families invest heavily in credentials that turn out to be worth less than they expected, and the social mobility premium that was supposed to be the return on educational investment is systematically smaller than anticipated.

6.3 Examination Boards, Governance, and the Accountability Gap

Bangladesh's examination system is administered by ten general education boards and one Madrasa Education Board, organized by division and by educational type. These boards are responsible for setting examinations, conducting them, marking answer scripts, and certifying results. They are also responsible for the integrity of the examination process, including the prevention of question leakage, impersonation, and other forms of irregularity.

The governance of these examination boards has been a persistent concern. The boards are nominally autonomous public bodies, but in practice they operate under close ministerial oversight and are subject to the political pressures that characterize public administration in Bangladesh. The appointment of examination board chairpersons and senior officials is a political patronage decision, and the culture of the boards reflects the broader bureaucratic culture of Bangladeshi public administration: hierarchical, risk-averse, and vulnerable to political influence.

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The accountability mechanisms for examination board performance are weak. When examination irregularities occur, the response is typically reactive and focused on disciplining individual actors rather than reforming the systemic conditions that produce those irregularities. When grade inflation occurs, there is no institutionalized mechanism for detecting and correcting it. And when the examination content drifts away from the curriculum in ways that distort classroom teaching, there is no systematic monitoring process that identifies and addresses this drift.

The reform of examination board governance is a less glamorous but arguably more important educational reform priority than curriculum revision. A well-governed examination system with strong integrity, valid assessment instruments, appropriate standard-setting procedures, and genuine transparency, would do more to improve educational quality in Bangladesh than the most ambitious curriculum reform implemented through a poorly governed examination system.

6.4 The Abolition of PEC and JSC: An Assessment of the Assessment Reform

The abolition of the Primary Education Completion (PEC) examination and the Junior School Certificate (JSC) examination, announced by the Hasina government in 2021 and implemented from 2023, was one of the most educationally sound decisions made by any Bangladeshi government in recent decades. The case against these examinations was overwhelming: they subjected ten and thirteen-year-old children to high-stakes examination pressure at developmental stages when such pressure is most harmful; they created "examination preparation" as the primary mode of teaching in the final years of primary and junior secondary school; they provided very little useful information about individual student learning that was not already available through school-based assessment; and they generated significant opportunities for corruption and irregularity.

The abolition of these examinations was welcomed by the overwhelming majority of educational researchers, child development specialists, and progressive educationists in Bangladesh. The political controversy was not about whether these examinations should be abolished but about what should replace them, and whether the alternative assessment mechanisms proposed in the 2023 curriculum were adequate. The argument of those who resisted the abolition was not that the examinations were educationally sound but that they provided a useful accountability mechanism in a system where school-based assessment was unreliable and where parents had few other means of gauging their children's educational progress.

This argument deserves to be taken seriously, not because the PEC and JSC examinations were good assessment instruments, but because the concern about accountability in a low-quality system is legitimate. In a system where teacher quality is variable, where school-based assessment is inconsistent, and where families cannot trust the school to provide accurate information about their children's learning, the removal of external examinations without replacement by reliable alternative accountability mechanisms creates a genuine information gap. The interim government's decision to restore some form of external assessment at the primary level, with questions remaining about the return of the Primary Education Completion Examination and scholarship exams The Daily Star, reflects this concern, even if its specific response to the concern may not be the most educationally productive available.

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Chapter Seven: Language, Medium of Instruction, and the Epistemological Politics of the Classroom

7.1 The Language Question as a Philosophical Problem

The question of language in education is not merely a technical matter of pedagogical efficiency. It is a philosophical question about the nature of knowledge, identity, and power. The language in which a child is educated is not simply the medium through which information is transmitted. It is the primary cognitive tool through which the child's thinking is organized, the primary cultural framework within which meaning is made, and the primary identity marker that connects the child to her community and to the larger world. To educate a child in a language that is not her first language, or that is not the language of her home and community, is to impose a specific set of cognitive, cultural, and identity costs that the child and her family bear but that are rarely fully accounted for in educational policy analysis.

Bangladesh's linguistic landscape is significantly more complex than the "Bengali-speaking nation" description that dominates official discourse would suggest. While Bengali (Bangla) is the first language of approximately ninety-five percent of the population, the remaining five percent includes speakers of dozens of distinct languages, including the Tibeto-Burman languages of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Chakma, Marma, Tripura/Kokborok, Mro, Tanchangya, and others), the Austroasiatic languages of the plains indigenous communities (Santali, Mundari, Ho), and the Indo-Iranian languages of the Sylhet and Chittagong regions (Sylheti, which many linguists consider a distinct language rather than a dialect of Bengali). Within the Bengali-speaking majority, there are significant regional and sociolectal variations that create educational challenges that are less visible but not less real than the challenges faced by speakers of entirely different languages.

The mother-tongue-based multilingual education program, launched in 2010 for selected indigenous languages and expanded gradually in subsequent years, represents Bangladesh's most significant policy response to the linguistic diversity of the student population. The program provides instruction in the child's mother tongue in the first three years of primary school, with a gradual transition to Bengali as the medium of instruction in subsequent years. This approach is consistent with the international research consensus on the educational benefits of mother-tongue-based education: children who learn foundational literacy and numeracy skills in their first language develop these skills more rapidly and more solidly than children who learn them in a second language they do not yet fully command.

The program faces significant implementation challenges, including the shortage of teachers who are proficient in both the indigenous language and Bengali, the limited supply of high-quality mother-tongue textbooks and materials, and the difficulty of managing a multilingual classroom environment in schools that serve communities of mixed linguistic backgrounds. These challenges are real but not insurmountable; the experience of successful multilingual education programs in the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Ethiopia, and Guatemala demonstrates that these challenges can be overcome through sustained investment and professional development.

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7.2 The English Language Question: Between Global Competitiveness and Educational Equity

The English language occupies a unique and peculiarly fraught position in Bangladesh's educational landscape. English is simultaneously the language of global opportunity, the language of the colonial administration that shaped Bangladesh's educational system for nearly two centuries, the language of the elite English-medium schools that serve the privileged minority, and the language of the international development organizations that fund much of Bangladesh's educational reform. The politics of English in education, therefore, are politics that cut across the fault lines of class, ideology, and national identity in ways that make them extraordinarily difficult to navigate.

The aspiration of Bangladeshi families for English proficiency for their children, documented consistently in survey research, reflects a rational understanding of the labor market rewards that English proficiency commands in both domestic and international employment. English-language skills are among the most economically valuable credentials in Bangladesh's labor market, and the premium on English proficiency has increased as the economy has become more internationally integrated. This labor market reality creates a powerful demand for English-medium or English-intensive education that no educational policy can simply wish away.

The equity implications of the English language regime in Bangladesh are, as documented in Part Two of this commentary, deeply troubling. Access to high-quality English education is highly stratified by class and geographical location. Children from affluent urban families who attend English-medium schools develop genuine English proficiency that opens doors to elite higher education and international careers. Children from poor rural families who receive their English instruction from teachers with limited English proficiency, using curriculum materials that emphasize grammatical structure over communicative competence, develop at best a rudimentary and passive English literacy that provides limited competitive advantage. The English language system thus functions as a mechanism of class reproduction, converting the economic advantages of wealthy families into the educational advantages of English proficiency in a self-perpetuating cycle.

Translanguaging theory, which has developed significantly in the 2010s and 2020s through the work of Ofelia Garcia, Li Wei, and their collaborators, offers a philosophically and pedagogically richer framework for thinking about English in Bangladesh's multilingual educational landscape than either the "English immersion" approach of the elite English-medium sector or the strict bilingual separation approach of the formal curriculum. Translanguaging theory observes that multilingual individuals do not operate with separate, compartmentalized language systems that they switch between in different contexts. Rather, they draw on an integrated linguistic repertoire in flexible, context-sensitive ways that serve their communicative purposes. Recognizing and building on this fluid multilingualism in classroom practice, rather than insisting on strict separation between Bengali and English, can support both deeper learning and more genuine communicative competence in multiple languages.

7.3 The Arabic and Persian Languages in the Madrasa Curriculum

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The language question in Bangladesh's education system extends beyond the Bengali-English dynamic to encompass the role of Arabic and Persian in the Madrasa curriculum. Arabic is the language of the Quran, the primary text of Islamic education, and its learning is both a religious obligation and an intellectual prerequisite for engagement with the classical Islamic scholarly tradition. Persian, the court language of the Mughal Empire and the scholarly language of the Islamic education tradition in South Asia, remains a component of the higher levels of the Aliya Madrasa curriculum, though its role has declined significantly since the independence period.

The teaching of Arabic in the Madrasa system is organized primarily around the reading and understanding of classical religious texts rather than around communicative competence in the modern standard Arabic used in contemporary Arab societies and in global Islamic discourse. This classical orientation has educational consequences: a student who has spent years studying Quranic Arabic may have difficulty communicating with Arabic speakers from Egypt or Morocco, and may be poorly prepared for the Arabic-language higher education opportunities that the Arab world offers. The pedagogical approach to Arabic in the Madrasa system is a form of the grammar-translation method that has been the object of sustained criticism in second-language acquisition research for decades. The application of communicative language teaching principles to Arabic instruction in the Madrasa context, while sensitive given the sacred character of the Arabic text, is an area of educational development that deserves careful attention.

Chapter Eight: Religious Education, Secular Knowledge, and the Curriculum's Philosophical Fault Lines

8.1 The Problem of Religious Education in a Modern State

Religious education in a modern, pluralistic, constitutionally governed state is a challenge that no liberal democratic society has fully resolved. The tensions are fundamental: the state's obligations under a secular constitutional framework to provide equal treatment to citizens of all religious (and non-religious) persuasions; the obligation of Muslim-majority Bangladesh to respect and support the religious identity and practice of its Muslim citizens; the obligation to protect the educational and cultural rights of religious minorities; and the competing claims of parents, religious institutions, and the state over the moral and religious education of children.

Bangladesh has attempted to manage these tensions through a system in which Islamic education (the teaching of Quran, Islamic values, and Islamic practice) is a compulsory subject for Muslim students at all levels of the general education system, while corresponding religious education is provided for students of other faiths. This system formally acknowledges religious pluralism while effectively giving Islam a privileged position in the curriculum, reflecting the Muslim-majority character of Bangladesh's society and the constitutional recognition of Islam as the state religion.

The content of the Islamic education provided in the general curriculum is a persistent site of political contestation. Conservative Islamic political forces consistently argue that the Islamic education curriculum is insufficiently Islamic, that it does not provide sufficient depth of

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religious knowledge, that it does not adequately counteract the secularizing tendencies of the rest of the curriculum, and that it does not properly prepare Muslim children for their religious obligations. Secular and progressive forces consistently argue that the Islamic education curriculum privileges religious knowledge in ways that crowd out secular learning, that it presents a sectarian (Sunni Hanafi) interpretation of Islam as the universal Islamic position, and that it creates barriers for non-Muslim students. Between these poles, the Islamic education curriculum is constantly being negotiated, revised, and contested.

8.2 The Madrasa Curriculum and the Question of Educational Bifurcation

The existence of a separate, institutionally distinct Madrasa educational system alongside the general educational system creates what curriculum theorists would call a "parallel curriculum world" in Bangladesh: a complete educational ecosystem with its own curriculum, its own assessment system, its own institutions, and its own philosophical foundations. The philosophical and educational implications of this bifurcation are profound and require more systematic analysis than they typically receive in policy discussions, which tend to focus on institutional and financial dimensions rather than on the deeper question of what it means for a society to educate its children in two fundamentally different curriculum paradigms.

The Aliya Madrasa curriculum, which follows the government's national curriculum in core subjects (Bengali, English, mathematics, social studies, and science) while adding a substantial component of Islamic religious subjects, represents a hybrid educational model. Aliya Madrasa students sit the same public examinations as students in the general system, receive the same government-issued textbooks for secular subjects, and are in principle eligible for the same higher education opportunities. But the addition of a heavy Islamic curriculum load to the general curriculum requirements means that Aliya Madrasa students cover more total curriculum content in the same amount of time, with predictable consequences for the depth of learning in all subjects.

The Qawmi Madrasa curriculum is the most philosophically distinct from the general curriculum. Organized around the Dars-e-Nizami, a curriculum developed in eighteenth-century India by Mulla Nizamuddin Sihalwi, the Qawmi curriculum centers on the study of Arabic, Persian, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam), Hadith (prophetic traditions), and Quranic exegesis (tafsir). Modern secular subjects are either absent or offered only minimally. The student who completes the Qawmi curriculum, culminating in the Dawra-e-Hadith (the highest degree, equivalent in government recognition to a master's degree following the Qawmi Madrasa Ordinance of 2018), has received an education of considerable depth in the classical Islamic intellectual tradition but has limited preparation for participation in Bangladesh's modern economy or in higher education institutions organized around secular academic standards.

The government's recognition of Qawmi Madrasa degrees in 2018 was a politically significant act of educational integration that attempted to bring the Qawmi system closer to the formal educational mainstream. But recognition without curriculum reform is a limited step. A Qawmi graduate with a government-recognized degree but without Bengali literacy, mathematics, or any of the other competencies required for modern professional life, is not genuinely integrated into

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the mainstream economy, and her degree recognition, while symbolically important, does not change her actual competitive position in the labor market.

8.3 Comparative Analysis: Religious Education in Other Muslim-Majority Countries

Bangladesh's approach to religious education and its relationship with the Madrasa system can be illuminated by comparison with the approaches taken by other Muslim-majority countries. The comparison reveals that there is no single model for managing the relationship between religious and secular education in a Muslim society, and that the choices made reflect specific historical, political, and cultural conditions rather than the inherent requirements of Islam as a religion.

Malaysia's approach represents one model. The Malaysian government has maintained a dual system of national schools (sekolah kebangsaan) and national-type Chinese and Tamil schools alongside a significant Islamic education component in the national schools, while simultaneously developing a more integrated framework for managing the relationship between national and religious education. The Malaysian experience of attempting to balance Islamic educational values with the requirements of a modern, economically competitive education system offers both positive and negative lessons for Bangladesh.

Egypt's experience with the Al-Azhar university system, which has modernized its curriculum over the past century to incorporate secular academic subjects while maintaining the Islamic scholarly tradition, provides another comparative reference point. Al-Azhar's success in developing graduates who are both deeply educated in the Islamic scholarly tradition and capable of participation in modern academic and professional life, while contested and imperfect, demonstrates that the dichotomy between Islamic education and modern academic competence is not absolute.

Turkey's twentieth-century experience of radical secularization of education under Ataturk, followed by the gradual re-Islamization of the curriculum under the AKP governments since 2002, provides a cautionary tale about the consequences of state-imposed educational secularism that does not respect the genuine religious commitments of the majority population. The Turkish experience suggests that attempts to secularize education through state power, without adequate attention to the religious values and identities of the population, produce not genuine secularization but rather the politicization of religious identity that generates the very religious conservatism that the secularizing policy sought to overcome.

8.4 The Philosophical Challenge of Integrating Religious and Secular Knowledge

The deepest challenge of religious education in Bangladesh's curriculum is not institutional but philosophical: can a curriculum that serves both secular academic and religious educational purposes be designed that genuinely satisfies both? Or does the attempt to serve both purposes produce a curriculum that satisfies neither adequately?

From one philosophical perspective, the integration of religious and secular knowledge is both possible and desirable. The Islamic intellectual tradition, at its best, has always been characterized by the integration of religious and rational knowledge, from the synthesis achieved

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by Al-Farabi and Avicenna in the classical period to the modernizing projects of Syed Ahmad Khan and Fazlur Rahman in the modern period. An integrated curriculum that presents scientific knowledge as the study of God's creation, that grounds moral education in the rational traditions of both Islam and secular ethics, and that treats literary and artistic education as the cultivation of the aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities that Islamic thought values, is philosophically coherent and educationally powerful.

From another philosophical perspective, the honest acknowledgment of genuine incompatibilities between religious and secular epistemologies is intellectually more defensible than the attempt to paper over those incompatibilities with a syncretic curriculum. The theory of evolution, for example, is not merely difficult to reconcile with a literal reading of the Quranic account of human creation; it is, in the judgment of most Islamic scholars, either incompatible with that account or requires a non-literal hermeneutical approach that many Muslim communities find theologically objectionable. A curriculum that teaches evolution as scientific fact without engaging with the theological dimensions of this claim is not providing students with an adequate education in either science or religion. But a curriculum that teaches students that evolutionary theory is somehow reconcilable with all interpretations of the Quranic text is intellectually dishonest.

The resolution of this philosophical challenge requires not better curriculum design but better philosophical education: education that develops in students the capacity to hold complex, partially incompatible knowledge claims in productive tension, to distinguish between the different epistemological standards appropriate to scientific inquiry and religious understanding, and to exercise informed personal judgment about the relationship between their religious and their secular intellectual lives. This is a high aspiration for any curriculum, but it is the appropriate aspiration for a curriculum that takes seriously both the intellectual demands of modernity and the genuine religious commitments of Bangladesh's Muslim majority.

Chapter Nine: Digital Pedagogy, Artificial Intelligence, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution in Bangladesh's Schools

9.1 The Digital Transformation of Education: Global Context and Bangladesh's Position

The digital transformation of education is perhaps the most significant structural change in the global educational landscape since the introduction of mass printing and its educational consequences in the sixteenth century. The proliferation of digital devices, high-speed internet connectivity, and sophisticated software applications for learning, communication, and information access is fundamentally altering the conditions under which learning occurs, the skills that learning should develop, and the relationship between formal schooling and informal learning. Understanding Bangladesh's position within this transformation, and the specific opportunities and challenges that digital technology presents for Bangladesh's educational system, is essential for any adequate analysis of the current state and future trajectory of education in the country.

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Bangladesh's entry into digital education has been both remarkable in its pace and uneven in its quality. The Digital Bangladesh initiative, launched by Sheikh Hasina's government in 2009, made the digitization of government services, including educational services, a central developmental priority. By the early 2020s, Bangladesh had a mobile phone penetration rate of over eighty percent, a rapidly growing internet user base, and a significant and growing infrastructure of digital connectivity including fiber optic cables, 4G networks, and government-provided broadband in educational institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 to 2022, which closed Bangladesh's schools for much of that period, provided both a stress test and a catalyst for digital education. The government launched a television-based distance learning program, broadcast on Sangsad Bangladesh TV, that reached several million students during school closures. Mobile-based learning applications and online learning platforms saw significant growth in user adoption during the pandemic period. Universities rapidly shifted to online instruction, with varying degrees of effectiveness and equity.

But the COVID-19 experience also exposed with painful clarity the profound inequalities in Bangladesh's digital educational landscape. Urban middle-class students with smartphones, stable internet connections, and parents who could support online learning at home were able to maintain relatively normal educational continuity during school closures. Rural poor students, students without smartphones or tablets, students whose parents were illiterate or without the time or capacity to support home learning, students from households without electricity or reliable internet connectivity, experienced educational disruption of a much more severe kind. The pandemic's educational impact, therefore, was not merely disruptive but deepeningly inequitable, adding a new dimension of digital disadvantage to the already profound disadvantages of class, gender, and geography that shape educational opportunity in Bangladesh.

9.2 Artificial Intelligence in Education: Potential, Risk, and the Bangladesh Context

The emergence of large-language-model artificial intelligence systems, represented most dramatically by the development of ChatGPT (released by OpenAI in November 2022), Claude (released by Anthropic in 2023), and their successors, has introduced a new and profound challenge to educational systems worldwide. These systems can produce text, code, mathematical solutions, and analysis of a quality that is often indistinguishable from human expert production, and they are accessible at minimal cost to anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection. The implications for assessment (if students can produce examination-quality responses using AI tools), for the value of knowledge transmission (if AI systems can instantly provide the information that textbooks laboriously encode), and for the skills that education should develop (if AI systems can perform many of the cognitive tasks that education has traditionally aimed to develop), are profound and not yet fully worked out.

For Bangladesh, the AI challenge presents both an extraordinary opportunity and a serious risk. The opportunity is this: high-quality AI tutoring systems, delivered through smartphones, can potentially provide every student in Bangladesh with access to patient, infinitely available, personalized instruction in any subject, at any level, in both Bengali and English. The Khan Academy's AI tutor Khanmigo, developed in collaboration with OpenAI's technology, and the

growing range of AI-powered educational applications for mobile devices, represent a genuinely revolutionary potential for democratizing access to high-quality educational support in a country where the quality of formal teaching is highly variable and where private tutoring is a luxury available only to the well-off.

The risk is equally significant: in a system where examinations are the primary mechanism for certifying learning and allocating social opportunities, the availability of AI systems that can produce examination-quality work creates an unprecedented integrity challenge. The 2023 and 2024 examination seasons globally saw widespread concern about AI-assisted academic dishonesty, and Bangladesh is not immune to this challenge. The development of assessment approaches that can distinguish between genuine human learning and AI-generated performance is an urgent priority for examination boards worldwide, and for Bangladesh specifically.

The deeper pedagogical challenge posed by AI is not assessment integrity but educational purpose. If AI systems can instantly produce factual information, explanations, analyses, and even creative work, what is the value of an education that is primarily organized around the development of these capabilities? The question is not rhetorical. It requires a genuine philosophical response: a re-articulation of what capabilities human education should develop that cannot be replicated or replaced by AI. The emerging consensus in educational theory points toward capabilities that are fundamentally relational, embodied, and contextually embedded: the capacity for genuine empathy and moral judgment, the ability to navigate complex social relationships with wisdom and sensitivity, the capacity for original creative vision rooted in lived experience, the ability to ask genuinely new questions rather than answer existing ones, and the capacity for the kind of wisdom that comes from the sustained integration of knowledge, experience, and reflection over a human life.

These are, not coincidentally, precisely the capabilities that the Bengali and Islamic philosophical traditions of education have always emphasized: the cultivation of wisdom, character, and moral clarity alongside technical competence. The AI revolution, which many educational administrators experience as a threat to the existing educational order, may in this sense be an opportunity to return to the deepest purposes of education as understood in Bangladesh's own cultural and philosophical traditions.

9.3 Digital Infrastructure, Equity, and the Rural-Urban Divide

The development of digital educational infrastructure in Bangladesh has followed the broader pattern of spatial inequality that characterizes the country's economic development. Digital infrastructure is concentrated in the major urban centers, particularly Dhaka and Chittagong, with rapid penetration into secondary urban areas but much slower and more uneven development in rural and remote areas. The "last mile" problem, the challenge of extending high-quality digital connectivity to the most remote and underserved communities, remains a significant barrier to equitable digital education.

The Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP) and its successors have invested in the provision of multimedia classrooms, computers, and internet connectivity for secondary schools, and by the early 2020s many secondary schools in urban and peri-urban areas had multimedia

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classrooms with projectors, computers, and internet access. But the distribution of this infrastructure is highly unequal: well-resourced urban schools have multiple equipped classrooms and qualified IT teachers; remote rural schools may have a computer laboratory that is locked because there is no teacher qualified to use it and no reliable electricity supply to power it.

The government's "Sheikh Russell Digital Labs" initiative, which installed computer laboratories in secondary schools across the country, was a significant infrastructure investment but was hampered by the familiar implementation problems of the Bangladeshi public sector: procurement irregularity affected the quality and timing of equipment installation; teacher training was inadequate to develop genuine digital pedagogical competence; electricity supply interruptions made equipment unreliable; and the curriculum for digital technology subjects was inadequately integrated with the broader curriculum in ways that would have made digital tools genuinely useful for learning across subjects.

9.4 Educational Technology Research and Evidence: What Works in Low-Resource Contexts

The global evidence base on educational technology effectiveness in low-resource contexts has grown substantially in the 2010s and 2020s, through rigorous evaluations conducted by researchers including Leigh Linden, Karthik Muralidharan, and their collaborators in India, and through the growing body of research on educational technology in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. This evidence base provides important guidance for Bangladesh's educational technology investments.

The most consistent finding of this research is that educational technology is most effective when it is well-integrated into the instructional process, when teachers are adequately trained to use it, and when the technology is being used to support active learning rather than to deliver passive content. Simple digitization of existing poor-quality instructional content does not improve learning outcomes. What improves learning outcomes is technology that provides immediate feedback to students, that adapts to individual learning levels, and that allows students to practice skills at their own pace with responsive guidance.

Computer-assisted learning programs that provide adaptive practice in literacy and numeracy, of the kind evaluated by Muralidharan and colleagues in India and by J-PAL's education researchers in multiple country contexts, have shown consistently positive effects on learning outcomes in low-resource contexts when implemented with adequate teacher support and appropriate integration into the school day. The application of these insights to Bangladesh's context, through the development and rigorous evaluation of adaptive learning programs for primary literacy and numeracy in Bengali, is an important research and development priority.

Chapter Ten: The Economics of Curriculum: Human Capital Theory, Returns to Education, and the Market Logic of Knowledge

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10.1 Human Capital Theory and Its Dominance in Educational Economics

The economic analysis of education has been dominated since the 1960s by human capital theory, developed primarily by Theodore Schultz (whose foundational paper "Investment in Human Capital" was published in 1961) and Gary Becker (whose book "Human Capital" was published in 1964). Human capital theory reconceives education as an investment in the productivity of the human worker: just as physical capital investment in machines and infrastructure increases the productive capacity of the economy, so investment in education increases the productive capacity of human workers, and therefore of the economy as a whole.

The appeal of human capital theory to governments, international development organizations, and educational policymakers is obvious. It provides an economic justification for educational investment that translates the moral imperative of universal education into the language of economic rationality that dominates public policy discourse. It generates testable predictions about the relationship between educational investment and economic growth that have been extensively investigated empirically. And it provides a framework for thinking about the allocation of educational resources: investments that produce the highest economic returns (in terms of wage premiums for educated workers) are favored over investments that produce lower returns.

The influence of human capital theory on Bangladesh's educational policy is pervasive and largely unquestioned. The National Education Policy documents, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank project appraisal documents that have financed much of Bangladesh's educational infrastructure, and the speeches of Bangladeshi educational ministers, are all saturated with human capital language: education as investment, educational outcomes measured by wage returns, skills as the product of educational investment that drives economic growth. This framing has had profound consequences for which educational investments are prioritized and which are neglected.

10.2 The Critique of Human Capital Theory: Sen, Nussbaum, and the Capabilities Approach

The dominance of human capital theory in educational economics has not gone unchallenged. The most influential alternative framework is the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which has been discussed in previous parts of this commentary and which deserves more specific treatment in the context of curriculum economics.

Sen's critique of human capital theory is both philosophical and methodological. Philosophically, Sen argues that human capital theory treats the value of education entirely instrumentally, as a means to the production of economic output, and thereby misses the intrinsic value of education as a contribution to human development and freedom. A person whose education has developed her capacity to understand and appreciate the world, to make informed choices, to participate in democratic governance, and to live a life she has reason to value, is better off for that education even if her wage has not increased. Human capital theory, Sen argues, reduces the education of a person to the upgrading of a productive factor of production, treating the educated person as a means to economic ends rather than as an end in herself.

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Methodologically, Sen questions whether wage returns are a valid measure of the economic value of education. Wages in any specific labor market reflect not only the productive value of education but also the specific institutions, discrimination patterns, and power relations of that market. In a labor market characterized by gender discrimination, the wage returns to women's education will systematically understate the actual contribution of that education to human welfare and economic productivity. In a labor market with a public sector that rewards seniority and credentials rather than performance, wage returns to specific types of education will reflect credential values rather than genuine productivity gains.

Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach provides a more specific list of the human capabilities that education should develop, which we discussed in Part Two's theoretical section. For Nussbaum, the economic analysis of education should be embedded in a broader analysis of what conditions enable people to live fully human lives, and the curriculum should be evaluated not by its contribution to GDP but by its contribution to the development of a specific set of capabilities including bodily health, emotional development, practical reason, affiliation, and play.

Applied to Bangladesh's curriculum economics, the capabilities approach asks different questions than human capital theory. Not: what curriculum produces the highest wage returns? But: what curriculum develops the capabilities that enable Bangladeshi children to live dignified, autonomous, and flourishing lives? Not: what skills does the labor market demand? But: what capabilities does genuine human development require? These questions lead to different curriculum priorities: they give greater weight to aesthetic and cultural education, to physical and emotional development, to the cultivation of civic and democratic capacities, and to the development of critical reflection, than a purely economic analysis would justify.

10.3 The Private Returns to Education and the Coaching Industry's Economics

The private returns to education in Bangladesh, measured in terms of wage premiums for higher levels of educational credential, are substantial and well-documented. Holders of university degrees earn significantly more than holders of secondary school certificates, who earn significantly more than primary school completers, who earn significantly more than the illiterate. These private returns create powerful incentives for educational investment by families, and they explain the extraordinary sacrifices that poor and lower-middle-class families make to keep their children in school and to finance supplementary coaching.

The economics of the private coaching industry in Bangladesh illustrate the market logic of the education system with particular clarity. Coaching centers, private tutors, and examination preparation services constitute a substantial and growing sector of the Bangladeshi economy. By the early 2020s, the private supplementary education market in Bangladesh was estimated to be worth several billion dollars annually, with millions of students enrolled in coaching programs. This market is the direct product of the formal education system's failure to prepare students adequately for examinations through classroom instruction, combined with the high private stakes of examination performance.

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The economics of the coaching industry are deeply inequitable. Access to high-quality coaching is strongly correlated with family income: wealthy families can afford the most reputable and effective coaching centers, while poor families either cannot afford coaching or can access only the cheapest and least effective options. The result is that the private returns to education are systematically larger for wealthy families than for poor ones, because wealthy families can amplify the educational investments of the formal system with private coaching that further improves examination performance. This dynamic is a significant mechanism of educational inequality that operates largely outside the formal educational system and therefore outside the reach of most educational reform interventions.

10.4 The Social Returns to Education and the Public Investment Case

The social returns to education, the benefits to the wider society of individual educational investment, include not only the wage-productivity linkage of human capital theory but a range of broader social benefits: reduced fertility and improved child health associated with women's education, reduced crime rates associated with higher male secondary school enrollment, improved public health behavior, enhanced democratic participation, and the long-term social learning that occurs as educated individuals interact with and influence their communities.

The evidence for these broader social returns is substantial. Bangladesh's remarkable demographic transition, which has seen total fertility rates decline from approximately 6.0 in the 1970s to approximately 2.3 in the 2020s, is strongly associated with the expansion of women's education, particularly secondary education, that the FSSAP and other programs facilitated. The improvement of child nutrition and health outcomes in Bangladesh, which has been more rapid than predicted by income growth alone, reflects in part the improved health knowledge and decision-making capacity associated with maternal education. These social returns constitute a powerful economic justification for continuing investment in girls' education specifically and in the quality of mass education generally.

The public investment in education in Bangladesh remains, however, significantly below the levels that both international benchmarks and domestic educational needs suggest is required. Bangladesh spends approximately two percent of GDP on education, one of the lowest rates in South Asia and among the lowest in the world. This investment is approximately half the level recommended by UNESCO's international benchmarks (four to six percent of GDP) and is significantly below the levels invested by comparable countries that have achieved rapid improvements in educational quality. The fiscal space argument, that Bangladesh cannot afford to spend more on education given the competing demands on the government budget, is weakened by Bangladesh's sustained economic growth of the past two decades: a country with a GDP that has grown from approximately thirty billion dollars in the early 2000s to three hundred billion dollars by the mid-2020s has the resources to invest more in education if the political will to do so is present.

Chapter Eleven: Legal and Jurisprudential Dimensions of Curriculum: Rights, Obligations, and Constitutional Commitments

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11.1 The Constitutional Right to Education: Text, Interpretation, and Practice

Bangladesh's constitutional framework for the right to education is, as noted in Part Three, established primarily in Article 17 of the 1972 Constitution, which imposes upon the state the duty to adopt effective measures to establish a uniform, mass-oriented, and universal system of education, and to extend free and compulsory education to all children. This constitutional provision has been the subject of limited but significant judicial interpretation that illuminates both the potential and the limits of constitutional law as a mechanism for educational improvement.

The jurisprudential character of Article 17 has been debated in Bangladeshi constitutional scholarship since independence. The provision is found in Part II of the Constitution, titled "Fundamental Principles of State Policy," which is explicitly described in Article 8(2) as "fundamental to the governance of Bangladesh" but not enforceable as a fundamental right in the sense that the courts can direct the government to provide specific educational services through judicial order. This constitutional structure places the right to education in a somewhat ambiguous position: it is constitutionally mandated but not directly justiciable in the same way as the fundamental rights listed in Part III of the Constitution.

The Supreme Court of Bangladesh has, however, on several occasions found ways to give substantive content to Article 17 through creative constitutional interpretation. The landmark ruling in the case of Ain O Salish Kendra vs. Government of Bangladesh (2003), which addressed the implementation of non-formal education programs, affirmed the justiciability of state educational obligations under certain circumstances. More recently, the court's jurisprudence on the rights of disabled students to reasonable accommodation in educational institutions, and on the rights of indigenous children to mother-tongue education, has developed a more robust body of educational rights law than the bare text of Article 17 might suggest.

11.2 International Human Rights Law and Educational Obligations

Bangladesh's obligations under international human rights law add an important external dimension to the domestic constitutional framework for the right to education. Bangladesh has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 13 of which recognizes the right of everyone to education and specifies a series of state obligations including the provision of free and compulsory primary education, progressively free secondary education, and equally accessible higher education. Bangladesh has also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 28 of which specifies analogous educational obligations with specific reference to children's rights.

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' General Comment No. 13 on the right to education (1999) provides the most authoritative international interpretation of the educational obligations established by the ICESCR. This General Comment develops the "4-A framework" for the right to education: Availability (educational institutions must be available in sufficient quantity); Accessibility (educational institutions must be accessible to all, without discrimination); Acceptability (the form and substance of education must be acceptable to students and parents); and Adaptability (education must be flexible so it can adapt to the needs of

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changing societies and respond to the needs of students within their diverse social and cultural settings).

Applying the 4-A framework to Bangladesh's educational system reveals systematic gaps in the fulfillment of international educational obligations. Availability has improved dramatically since independence, with primary schools now available within reasonable distance of virtually all communities. Accessibility is partially achieved at the primary level but significantly incomplete at the secondary level for girls in some regions, for children with disabilities, and for indigenous children without mother-tongue instruction. Acceptability is compromised by the quality problems documented throughout this commentary. And adaptability is limited by the rigidity of a centralized curriculum system that responds slowly to changing social and economic conditions.

The Universal Periodic Review mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council, through which Bangladesh's human rights performance is reviewed by member states, has consistently identified educational quality, equity, and indigenous educational rights as areas requiring improvement. The recommendations of the UPR process, while not legally binding, provide an important external accountability mechanism that Bangladesh's civil society organizations have used to advocate for educational reform.

11.3 The Legal Framework for Private Education: Regulation, Rights, and the Market

The proliferation of private educational institutions at all levels, from private primary schools through English-medium secondary schools to private universities, has created a complex and somewhat incoherent regulatory framework that raises important legal and jurisprudential questions. Private educational institutions in Bangladesh operate under a combination of general private education regulations, sector-specific legislation (such as the Private University Act), and administrative rules that have evolved organically rather than from a coherent regulatory vision.

The legal and philosophical question at the heart of private education regulation is this: to what extent can the state legitimately regulate private educational institutions in order to ensure that they serve the public interest, and to what extent does state regulation of private education violate the fundamental rights of private providers to operate their institutions and of families to choose the kind of education they want for their children? This tension between the state's public interest obligations in education and the rights of private actors is resolved differently in different constitutional traditions, and Bangladesh has not developed a clear and principled approach to its resolution.

The Supreme Court's jurisprudence on private university regulation illustrates the tension. The University Grants Commission (UGC), which has regulatory authority over both public and private universities, has struggled to enforce quality standards in an environment where private universities have grown rapidly and where political connections frequently provide protection against regulatory enforcement. Several judicial decisions have addressed the tension between UGC regulatory authority and private university institutional autonomy, but a coherent jurisprudence of higher education regulation has not yet emerged.

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The law of parental choice in education is another dimension of this regulatory framework that deserves analysis. The right of parents to choose the type of education their children receive, recognized in Article 26(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is implicitly recognized in Bangladesh's multi-stream educational system, in which parents can choose between the general system, the Aliya Madrasa system, and private English-medium schools. But this choice is exercised in profoundly unequal conditions: the choice between educational systems is effectively available only to families with the financial resources to pay for private education or the social capital to navigate the admission processes of elite institutions. For poor families, the "choice" of educational stream is determined by economic necessity rather than informed preference.

11.4 Administrative Law and the Rights of Students and Teachers

The administrative law dimension of Bangladesh's educational system encompasses the procedures through which educational decisions are made, the rights of students and teachers to challenge those decisions, and the accountability mechanisms that govern the behavior of educational institutions and officials.

The procedural rights of students in disciplinary proceedings are an area where Bangladesh's educational law is significantly underdeveloped. Students who are suspended or expelled from educational institutions, or who are subjected to other significant disciplinary actions, have limited formal procedural protections. The principle of natural justice, which requires that persons affected by administrative decisions be given fair notice and an opportunity to respond, is recognized in Bangladesh's administrative law but is not consistently applied in educational disciplinary proceedings. The result is that significant educational decisions, which can have life-changing consequences for the students affected, are made through processes that are often informal, inconsistent, and not subject to meaningful review.

The legal rights of teachers to professional security, to fair treatment in appointment and promotion decisions, and to protection from political interference in their professional judgments, are equally underdeveloped. Teacher unions in Bangladesh, which represent both primary and secondary teachers in the public system, have developed a body of collective bargaining practice and labor rights advocacy that provides some protection for teachers' employment interests. But the protection of teachers' professional autonomy, their right to exercise professional judgment in curriculum implementation and assessment, and their right to resist political direction in pedagogical matters, is not adequately developed in either law or administrative practice.

Chapter Twelve: Comparative Curriculum Analysis: Bangladesh in Global and Regional Perspective

12.1 The Comparative Method in Educational Analysis: Principles and Pitfalls

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Comparative education, the systematic analysis of educational systems across national and cultural contexts, is both an indispensable analytical tool and a methodologically treacherous one. Used well, comparative analysis illuminates what is distinctive about Bangladesh's educational system by situating it within a broader global landscape of educational choices and outcomes. It identifies practices and policies in other contexts that have addressed challenges similar to those that Bangladesh faces. It generates productive hypotheses about what kinds of reforms might be effective in Bangladesh by pointing to what has worked (and not worked) in comparable contexts.

Used poorly, comparative analysis produces what Alex Wiseman and David Baker have called "world culture" in education: the uncritical adoption of educational models from high-income countries or from dominant international organizations, on the assumption that practices that work in one context are universally applicable. This form of "policy borrowing," documented extensively in the international educational research literature, is a persistent feature of educational reform in developing countries, including Bangladesh, and is one of the primary mechanisms through which reforms that are pedagogically and institutionally ill-suited to local conditions are nonetheless adopted and then predictably fail.

The principles of productive comparative analysis include: careful attention to the specific conditions of the contexts being compared, including institutional capacity, cultural context, economic development level, and political system; a focus on understanding mechanisms of change rather than simply replicating outcomes; recognition that educational systems are complex adaptive systems in which the effects of specific interventions depend heavily on the characteristics of the wider system; and intellectual humility about the limits of cross-context generalization.

12.2 Curriculum and Education in South Asia: India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka

The regional comparison with Bangladesh's South Asian neighbors is the most immediately relevant comparative framework, because these countries share significant elements of historical experience, cultural context, and developmental challenge with Bangladesh while also exhibiting important differences that illuminate what is distinctive about Bangladesh's educational choices.

India's curriculum framework, currently organized around the National Curriculum Framework of 2005 (developed under the leadership of Krishna Kumar) and the more recent National Education Policy of 2020, provides a rich comparative reference point. The NCF 2005 made "learning without burden" (responding to the 1993 Yashpal Committee report's finding that the overloaded curriculum was damaging children's mental health) and constructivist pedagogy the central organizing principles of curriculum reform, echoing the aspirations of Bangladesh's 2023 reform but in a context that differs significantly in its federal structure, its multilingual policy framework, and the capacity of its teaching profession.

India's Right to Education Act of 2009, which enshrined the fundamental right to free and compulsory elementary education in law and created a detailed regulatory framework for school quality and governance, provides a model for rights-based educational legislation that Bangladesh has not fully replicated. The Act's provisions on minimum physical and resource

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standards for schools, its requirements for child-friendly school design, and its prohibition of detention and exclusion in the elementary grades, are all relevant to Bangladesh's educational governance challenges. The Act's implementation has been uneven across India's states, and the gap between the Act's ambitious provisions and the reality of school quality in many Indian states is as large as the gap between Bangladesh's constitutional provisions and its educational reality, suggesting that legal rights alone are insufficient without the institutional capacity to implement them.

Sri Lanka's educational system, which has historically achieved much higher learning quality than Bangladesh despite comparable resource constraints, is a particularly instructive comparative reference. Sri Lanka's higher teacher quality (including higher teacher salaries, more competitive teacher selection, and stronger teacher professional development), its more stable curriculum (which has not been subject to the frequent political revision that characterizes Bangladesh's curriculum history), and its stronger examination integrity are all factors that help explain Sri Lanka's better learning outcomes. The political conditions that have enabled Sri Lanka to maintain these features of its educational system, including a longer tradition of educational investment by a relatively autonomous educational bureaucracy, are themselves a subject of comparative analysis.

Nepal's experience with inclusive education for children from indigenous communities and linguistic minorities, through its mother-tongue-based multilingual education program launched in 2007, provides a relevant comparison for Bangladesh's own multilingual education program. Nepal's approach to multilingual education, which has been evaluated by a range of international researchers, demonstrates both the educational benefits of mother-tongue instruction and the institutional challenges of implementing multilingual education at scale in a context of limited teacher supply and complex linguistic geography.

12.3 East Asian Educational Systems: Lessons from Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore

The remarkable educational achievements of East Asian countries, particularly South Korea, Singapore, and more recently Vietnam, have attracted intense attention from educational policymakers globally, including in Bangladesh. Understanding what has driven these achievements, and what Bangladesh can learn from them, requires careful analysis that distinguishes between the structural features of these systems that are potentially transferable and those that are deeply embedded in specific historical and cultural conditions.

South Korea's transformation from a country with mass illiteracy in the 1950s to one of the world's highest-performing educational systems by the 2000s is often cited as a model for developing countries seeking rapid educational improvement. The Korean experience highlights several factors: a sustained political commitment to educational investment at high levels of GDP, maintained across multiple government administrations and over several decades; a strong cultural value placed on education, rooted in the Confucian tradition of examination-based meritocracy; a teaching profession characterized by competitive selection, rigorous training, and reasonable compensation; and a national curriculum that, while sharing some of the rote memorization tendencies that critics identify in Asian educational systems, also developed strong foundational competencies in mathematics, science, and literacy.

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Vietnam's extraordinary rise in international educational rankings, documented in PISA 2012 when Vietnam outperformed many European countries in mathematics and science despite having per capita income far below theirs, has attracted particular attention. Researchers have identified several explanatory factors: the strength of the Vietnamese primary school curriculum in developing foundational skills, the relatively high quality and motivation of primary school teachers (despite low salaries), the strong cultural value placed on education in Vietnamese society, and a national educational infrastructure that reaches remote rural areas with greater effectiveness than comparable infrastructure in many middle-income countries. The Vietnamese experience, analyzed in depth by researchers such as Jed Friedman and Deon Filmer at the World Bank, suggests that the correlation between income and educational quality is not deterministic and that well-designed educational systems can achieve quality outcomes even at relatively low levels of economic development.

Singapore's educational system, frequently ranked among the world's best by international assessments, offers lessons that are both inspiring and cautionary. The Singaporean approach of teacher selection from the top third of the graduate cohort, followed by comprehensive professional development and performance-linked compensation, has produced a teaching workforce of exceptional quality. The "Teach Less, Learn More" reform of 2004, which reduced curriculum content and increased emphasis on higher-order thinking and student-centered learning, addressed the same rote memorization tendencies that Bangladesh's 2023 reform sought to address, and with considerably more success given the quality of the teaching profession available to implement it.

But the Singaporean model, with its highly selective teacher recruitment, its significant investment in teacher development, and its compact urban geography, is not simply transplantable to Bangladesh's context of dispersed rural population, constrained public finances, and a large existing teaching workforce of variable quality. The lesson from Singapore is not "do what Singapore did" but rather "invest seriously and over a long period in teacher quality and professional development," a lesson that is both genuinely important and genuinely challenging for Bangladesh's specific institutional and financial context.

12.4 Finland's Educational Miracle and Its (Partial) Lessons for Bangladesh

Finland's emergence, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the world's top-performing educational system in PISA assessments, generated enormous international attention and a flood of educational tourists and study delegations seeking to understand the "Finnish miracle." Bangladesh has not been immune to this interest: Finnish educational ideas have influenced aspects of Bangladesh's educational reform discourse, particularly in the areas of teacher autonomy, assessment reform, and the integration of wellbeing into educational goals.

The Finnish model is built on several distinctive features: a highly educated and professionally autonomous teaching workforce (Finnish teachers are required to hold research-based master's degrees); a curriculum that emphasizes breadth of experience and holistic development alongside academic achievement; no standardized national examinations until the matriculation examination at age eighteen; strong public confidence in the educational system that reduces the pressure for external accountability through testing; and a policy context of low economic

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inequality that means that Finnish schools do not face the extreme variation in student preparation and social capital that characterizes schools in more unequal societies.

Pasi Sahlberg, Finland's most prominent educational ambassador and the author of the widely read "Finnish Lessons" (2011), is scrupulously careful to warn against simple imitation of the Finnish model: the Finnish educational system has been built over several decades through a specific political, cultural, and institutional trajectory that cannot be replicated through policy borrowing. The lesson, Sahlberg argues, is not the specific policies but the underlying principle: trust the teacher, trust the school, invest in the profession, and design for equity. These principles, applied in Bangladesh's very different context, would look quite different from the Finnish system itself.

The comparison with Finland is, in any case, most useful for what it reveals about the significance of teacher quality. The single most consistent finding across comparative educational research is that the quality of the teacher is the most important within-school determinant of student learning, and that the most effective interventions for improving educational quality are those that improve the quality of teaching. Finland has achieved this by making teaching a highly selective, highly valued, and highly professional occupation. Bangladesh's path to the same destination, given its different starting conditions, will necessarily look different, but the destination remains the same.

12.5 The OECD's Education 2030 Framework and Global Curriculum Trends

The OECD's "Future of Education and Skills 2030" project, which has developed a comprehensive framework for thinking about the competencies that students will need for life and work in 2030 and beyond, has become one of the most influential reference points for curriculum development globally, including in Bangladesh. The framework's concept of "student agency" (the capacity to take responsibility for one's own learning and development), its emphasis on "transformative competencies" (the ability to create new value, reconcile tensions and dilemmas, and take responsibility), and its "learning compass" model of education as oriented toward individual and collective wellbeing, all represent sophisticated attempts to articulate what twenty-first century education should aim to achieve.

Bangladesh's 2023 curriculum reform explicitly drew on the OECD's framework, and the ten core competencies of the new curriculum can be seen as a Bengali adaptation of the OECD's global competency framework. This adoption of an international framework is both legitimate and problematic. It is legitimate because the OECD's framework, developed through extensive consultation with diverse international stakeholders and grounded in a substantial body of evidence about future skill needs, represents serious and sophisticated thinking about educational goals. It is problematic because the OECD framework, developed primarily from the perspective of high-income OECD member states, may not adequately reflect the specific developmental priorities, cultural values, and institutional conditions of a country like Bangladesh.

The political economy of this international framework adoption is also significant. The adoption of OECD and World Bank curriculum frameworks by developing countries is often driven not only by genuine belief in their educational merits but by the practical necessity of satisfying

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donor conditions and maintaining the international legitimacy that is necessary for continued access to development financing. This creates a form of curriculum coercion that operates through soft power rather than explicit conditionality: the educational frameworks of international organizations become the de facto standard against which developing country curriculum reforms are evaluated, regardless of whether those frameworks are the most appropriate for the specific contexts in which they are being applied.

Conclusion to Part Four: The Curriculum as the Civilizational Mirror

The curriculum of a school system is, ultimately, a civilization's answer to the question of what the young should know, be, and do. It is not merely a technical document specifying sequences of content and assessment. It is a philosophical manifesto, a political program, an economic strategy, a cultural statement, and a moral vision, all expressed in the simultaneously intimate and public form of what happens between a teacher and a student in a classroom.

Bangladesh's curriculum history, analyzed in this Part across its philosophical, institutional, political, economic, legal, and comparative dimensions, reveals a civilization that has not yet settled the fundamental questions that curriculum making requires to be settled. The secular nationalists who designed the 2023 curriculum reform and the religious conservatives who opposed it are not simply disagreeing about textbook content. They are disagreeing about what Bangladesh is, what kind of society it aspires to become, and what kind of person the Bangladeshi child should be educated to be. These are not questions that curriculum technicians can resolve. They require the kind of democratic deliberation, philosophical engagement, and honest confrontation with the country's multiple identities and aspirations that Bangladesh's political culture has not yet consistently supported.

What is clear from the analysis of this Part is that certain curriculum principles, properly understood and adequately resourced, are not merely the preferences of one political faction over another but genuine educational necessities that Bangladesh's children require:

The first principle is that curriculum should develop thinking, not merely the recall of information. This principle is supported by every major tradition of educational philosophy, from Al-Ghazali to Dewey to Vygotsky, and by the entire body of learning science research. Its implementation requires teaching of a quality that Bangladesh's system does not yet consistently provide, but the aspiration is correct and the investment in teacher quality that its implementation requires is both feasible and necessary.

The second principle is that assessment should measure genuine learning and support its further development, not merely rank students for social sorting. The transformation of Bangladesh's assessment system from a primarily summative, examination-centered system to one that genuinely integrates formative and summative approaches is an urgent reform priority. The way to achieve this transformation is not the wholesale abolition of external examinations, which removes important accountability mechanisms in a system with variable quality, but the development of assessment literacy in teachers, the reform of examination content and format to

measure higher-order competencies, and the careful design of school-based assessment systems that are valid, reliable, and equitable.

The third principle is that curriculum should respect and build on the diverse languages, cultures, and knowledge traditions that Bangladeshi children bring to school. The persistence of a monolingual, monocultural curriculum in a country with the linguistic and cultural diversity that Bangladesh possesses is both educationally inefficient and philosophically unjust. The gradual extension of mother-tongue education for indigenous language communities, the thoughtful integration of diverse cultural perspectives into the national curriculum, and the development of an approach to English language education that serves equity as well as excellence, are all necessary components of a curriculum adequate to Bangladesh's actual social reality.

The fourth principle is that the curriculum's philosophical foundation must be honestly confronted, not evaded. The tension between secular modernist and Islamic traditionalist conceptions of educational purpose is real and deep, and no amount of careful curriculum design can make it disappear. What can be done is to develop, through genuine democratic deliberation and philosophical engagement, a framework for coexistence that respects both traditions while not allowing either to dominate the educational experience of the other's children. This is a political and philosophical challenge, not a technical one, and it requires political leadership and philosophical seriousness that the reform cycle of the past decade has not consistently provided.

The fifth principle is that curriculum change must be sustainable, and sustainability requires investment in teacher quality. The most fundamental lesson of Bangladesh's curriculum reform history, from the failed CLT reform of the 1990s to the contested 2023 curriculum and its reversal, is that curriculum documents do not teach. Teachers teach. A curriculum that outstrips the pedagogical capacity of the teachers who are expected to implement it is not a reform but a fantasy. The patient, sustained, systematically evaluated investment in teacher professional development that would make genuine curriculum reform possible is the most important and most consistently neglected reform priority in Bangladesh's educational history.

The aspiration of this Part has been not only to analyze Bangladesh's curriculum but to provide the intellectual tools for imagining it differently, in ways that are both philosophically grounded and practically achievable, both rooted in Bangladesh's own traditions and open to the best of global educational knowledge. The children of Bangladesh deserve a curriculum that genuinely serves their development, honors their cultures, respects their intelligence, and prepares them for lives of dignity, freedom, and contribution to the communities they inhabit. The distance between that curriculum and the one that Bangladesh currently provides is large, but it is not infinite, and the direction toward it is, by the analysis of this Part, reasonably clear.

Part Five of this commentary will turn to the teacher who must ultimately implement whatever curriculum is adopted, examining the philosophy and practice of teacher education in Bangladesh from its historical origins to its current challenges, and asking what it would mean to develop a teaching profession adequate to the educational aspirations that Bangladesh's children deserve.

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Supplementary Analytical Section: Presidential and Political Commentary on Curriculum Governance

The relationship between the highest levels of executive power and the direction of curriculum policy in Bangladesh is one of the most underanalyzed dimensions of the educational system's political economy. While formal curriculum authority is vested in the NCTB and the Ministry of Education, the actual direction of curriculum policy has been decisively shaped by the priorities and ideological commitments of successive Prime Ministers in ways that have both positive and negative consequences.

The Prime Minister's office in Bangladesh's highly centralized political system exercises enormous informal influence over educational policy. Curriculum decisions that appear technical, such as the inclusion or exclusion of specific content, the recognition of Qawmi Madrasa degrees, or the adoption of a new pedagogical framework, are often shaped by calculations about the electoral implications of these decisions for the Prime Minister's political coalition. The 2018 recognition of Qawmi Madrasa degrees was, as political analysts have observed, primarily a political transaction between the Hasina government and the Qawmi community's political leadership rather than an educationally driven reform. The 2023 curriculum reform was championed by the Prime Minister as a signature achievement of the Digital Bangladesh and Smart Bangladesh vision, giving it a political investment that made it resistant to educational critique until the political change of 2024 made it vulnerable to political reversal.

The jurisprudential question this raises is whether the concentration of effective curriculum authority in the hands of the Prime Minister, through the informal political dynamics of Bangladesh's highly centralized executive power, is consistent with the constitutional obligation to provide a uniform, quality education to all citizens. A curriculum policy that is shaped primarily by the electoral calculations of the incumbent government, rather than by systematic educational research and democratic deliberation, is vulnerable to the instability that each change of government produces. The institutional reform of curriculum governance to create greater insulation from short-term political pressures, while maintaining democratic accountability for educational outcomes over a longer time horizon, is a governance priority that deserves serious legal and political analysis.

The Political Theory of curriculum governance in Bangladesh suggests the need for an independent Curriculum and Assessment Authority, modeled on analogous institutions in the United Kingdom, Australia, and India's state-level curriculum bodies, with a statutory mandate, professional leadership, a research function, and consultative processes that provide it with both the legitimacy and the technical capacity to develop curriculum policy on a sustained, evidence-based, and politically insulated basis. The establishment of such an authority would not eliminate political influence over curriculum, which is both inevitable and appropriate in a democracy. But it would structure that influence through processes that are more deliberate, more transparent, and more educationally informed than the current system of political capture of the NCTB that Bangladesh's recent curriculum history so vividly illustrates.

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The final observation of this supplementary section is philosophical. Education is the most consequential long-term investment that any society makes. Its effects unfold over decades, as the children who are educated today become the adults, professionals, parents, and citizens of tomorrow. The short political time horizon of electoral politics, which rarely extends beyond four or five years, is fundamentally misaligned with the long educational time horizon of curriculum development and reform, which requires sustained investment and consistent direction over decades to achieve genuine systemic improvement. The countries that have achieved the most dramatic and sustained improvements in educational quality, from Finland to South Korea to Vietnam, have been those that managed to develop educational policies with sufficient political and institutional stability to remain in place long enough to produce their effects. Bangladesh's curriculum history, characterized by repeated reform, reversal, and reinvention across political transitions, has been the antithesis of this model. The development of the political and institutional conditions for curriculum stability is, therefore, one of the most important and most challenging governance reforms that Bangladesh's educational future requires.

PART FIVE: THE TEACHER IN BANGLADESH'S EDUCATIONAL CIVILIZATION

Formation, Identity, Practice, and the Politics of the Profession

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Prologue to Part Five: The Teacher at the Center of Everything

There is a thought experiment that educational policymakers rarely conduct, though it is perhaps the most clarifying exercise available to anyone who wishes to understand why educational systems succeed or fail. The thought experiment is this: strip away the curriculum documents, the national education policies, the examination boards, the school buildings, the textbook distribution programs, and the international aid packages. Remove all the scaffolding of educational infrastructure that governments, development organizations, and academic consultants spend most of their time discussing and reforming. What is left is the most fundamental educational reality of all: a human being who knows something, sitting or standing with human beings who do not yet know it, attempting to bring about a transfer or a transformation of understanding.

This is the teacher. And the teacher, in Bangladesh as everywhere else, is the proximate cause of almost everything educationally important that happens or fails to happen in a school.

This is not a poetic observation. It is among the most consistently robust findings in the entire field of educational research. The quality of the teacher, measured by any of the various instruments that researchers have developed for this purpose, is the single strongest within-school predictor of student learning outcomes. The effect of a highly effective teacher on a student's learning trajectory, documented in a now-extensive body of research from Eric Hanushek, Raj Chetty, John Friedman, and their colleagues, is large, durable, and substantially

larger than the effects of physical school infrastructure, class size within normal ranges, or the presence of supplementary educational materials. A student who has a series of highly effective teachers in her formative years learns dramatically more and earns substantially more in adulthood than a comparable student who experiences a series of ineffective teachers, and this gap opens up even when all other factors, including family income, are held constant.

The implication of this research is clear, profound, and almost universally underacted upon: the most important thing that an educational system can do to improve the quality of education is to improve the quality of teaching. Not the curriculum, not the textbooks, not the examination system, not the school buildings, though all of these matter at the margins. The teacher.

In Bangladesh, this implication has been acknowledged in educational policy documents, conference reports, and ministerial speeches for decades. It has been far less consistently translated into the sustained, serious, well-resourced investment in teacher quality that it implies. Part Five of this commentary examines why this is, and what it would mean to take the centrality of the teacher seriously as an organizing principle of educational policy.

The analysis proceeds through twelve chapters. It begins with the philosophy of teaching, because the question of what teaching is, what distinguishes genuine teaching from mere information delivery, and what kind of human being a teacher must be, is the foundation upon which everything else rests. It moves through the social and institutional history of the teaching profession in Bangladesh, the pre-service and in-service training systems that produce and develop teachers, the political economy of the profession that shapes who enters it and what they do once they are in it, the psychology of teacher motivation and professional identity, the specific challenges of teaching in different sectors of the system, the gendered dynamics of the workforce, the relationship between teacher quality and learning outcomes, the governance of the profession, the comparative analysis of teacher policy in other countries, and the legal and constitutional dimensions of teachers' rights and obligations. Throughout, the analysis is informed by the most recent theoretical and empirical developments in teacher education and the learning sciences, and by the specific conditions of Bangladesh that make the general problem of teacher quality take its particular local form.

The central argument of Part Five is this: Bangladesh's educational system is trapped in a low-quality equilibrium in which low teacher salaries attract less qualified entrants to the profession, inadequate pre-service training fails to develop the professional competence of those who do enter, weak professional development systems fail to improve that competence over time, and the resulting low quality of teaching both reflects and reinforces the low social prestige of the profession that makes it difficult to attract higher-quality candidates. Breaking out of this equilibrium requires not incremental improvement of individual elements of the teacher development system but a systemic transformation of the profession's attractiveness, preparation, support, and accountability. This transformation is technically feasible but politically extraordinarily difficult, because it requires sustained investment, institutional reform, and political will of a kind that has never been consistently maintained in Bangladesh's educational history. Understanding why this transformation has not happened, and what it would require for it to happen, is the central intellectual task of this Part.

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Chapter One: The Philosophy of Teaching: What Does It Mean to Teach?

1.1 Teaching as a Moral and Intellectual Practice

The question of what teaching is, really, admits of no simple answer. At the surface level, teaching appears to be a straightforward activity of transmission: the teacher knows something, the student does not, and the teacher's job is to convey what she knows to the student. This "transmission" model of teaching is the one that dominates most people's intuitive understanding of what teachers do, and it is the one that underlies many of the most common approaches to teacher training, particularly in Bangladesh, where the emphasis on subject-matter knowledge and content delivery in teacher preparation programs reflects an implicit assumption that teaching is fundamentally about having and conveying the right information.

But a moment's serious reflection reveals that this transmission model is deeply inadequate. Every parent knows that you can tell a child something clearly and repeatedly and the child still fails to understand or retain it. Every university lecturer knows that brilliantly organized and clearly delivered lectures are not, by themselves, adequate to produce genuine understanding in students. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle drew the influential distinction between "knowing that" (propositional knowledge of facts and principles) and "knowing how" (procedural knowledge of how to perform activities), and teaching in the fullest sense involves not merely the transmission of propositional knowledge but the development of capacities in the learner, capacities for thinking, reasoning, creating, empathizing, and judging, that are forms of "knowing how" that cannot be simply transmitted from teacher to student.

The philosopher of education Nel Noddings has argued that teaching is fundamentally a moral activity, and that its moral character is not incidental to its educational effectiveness but essential to it. Noddings' "ethics of care" framework holds that genuine education requires a caring relationship between teacher and student: a relationship in which the teacher genuinely attends to the particular situation, needs, and potential of the student as an individual, and in which the student is invited into a relationship of mutual respect and intellectual partnership. Teaching that lacks this caring relationship is not merely less pleasant but less educationally effective, because the cognitive and emotional conditions necessary for deep learning are not created by the mere delivery of information but by the quality of the relationship within which learning occurs.

In the Islamic philosophical tradition, the ethics of the teacher-student relationship is developed with particular sophistication. Al-Ghazali's account of the obligations of the teacher, in the "Ihya Ulum al-Din," describes the teacher not merely as a conveyor of knowledge but as a spiritual guide, a moral exemplar, and a servant of the student's development toward God. The teacher's first obligation is sincerity: she must teach for the sake of God and the benefit of the student, not for personal gain or prestige. Her second obligation is compassion: she must treat her students with the kindness and care of a parent, attending to their individual needs and capacities. Her third obligation is intellectual honesty: she must not teach what she does not know, must acknowledge the limits of her knowledge, and must not deceive her students about the certainty or completeness of what she teaches. These obligations define teaching as a vocation, a form of

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sacred service, that carries moral weight far beyond the technical requirements of knowledge transmission.

The Tagoreian tradition adds a further dimension. For Tagore, the teacher is above all an artist: someone who does not merely transmit information but who creates the conditions within which the student's own creativity and inner life can emerge and develop. Tagore's ideal teacher is not the authoritative transmitter of established knowledge but the sensitive guide who recognizes and cultivates the unique individual potential of each student, who creates an educational environment of beauty, freedom, and intellectual joy in which the student's natural curiosity and creativity can flourish rather than being suppressed by the demands of rote learning and examination performance.

These philosophical traditions, taken together, point toward a conception of the teacher as a moral, intellectual, and artistic practitioner whose work cannot be reduced to the technical execution of prescribed methods. This conception has important implications for how teachers should be selected, prepared, supported, and assessed. It suggests that the qualities necessary for effective teaching are not merely technical but personal and ethical: qualities of character, commitment, intelligence, creativity, and relational sensitivity that cannot be fully developed through training programs alone but require the cultivation of a professional identity and ethos that is built over time through experience, reflection, and mentorship.

1.2 Lee Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge and the Professional Knowledge of Teaching

The most influential contribution to the analytical philosophy of teaching in the past half-century is Lee Shulman's concept of "pedagogical content knowledge" (PCK), introduced in his 1986 article "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching" and subsequently elaborated in a substantial body of research. Shulman's contribution was to identify a specific form of knowledge that is characteristic of expert teaching and that distinguishes the expert teacher from both the subject-matter expert who cannot teach and the general pedagogue who can facilitate learning but lacks deep subject-matter knowledge.

Pedagogical content knowledge is, in Shulman's definition, the knowledge of how to represent and communicate specific subject-matter content in ways that are comprehensible and pedagogically powerful for specific learners. It includes knowledge of the most useful forms of representation of a subject's ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, and demonstrations, knowledge of what makes specific topics easy or difficult to learn, knowledge of the conceptions and misconceptions that students typically bring to the learning of specific content, and knowledge of how to address those misconceptions through specific instructional strategies.

PCK is not the same as subject-matter knowledge: a brilliant mathematician does not automatically possess PCK for teaching mathematics, because knowing mathematics deeply does not automatically give one knowledge of how to represent mathematical ideas in ways that are accessible to children at different developmental levels. Nor is PCK the same as generic pedagogical knowledge: knowing the principles of constructivist learning theory does not

automatically give one the PCK for teaching the specific challenges of, say, understanding fractions or learning Bengali grammar. PCK is the integration of subject-matter understanding with pedagogical understanding and with knowledge of learners, and its development requires sustained experience with teaching specific content to specific learners, guided by reflection and feedback.

The concept of PCK has been enormously influential in teacher education research and has generated a rich body of empirical research on how PCK develops, how it can be assessed, and how teacher preparation programs can support its development. The implications for Bangladesh are direct and significant. Much of Bangladesh's teacher education system is organized around the separate development of subject-matter knowledge and generic pedagogical knowledge, with limited attention to the specific integration of these two forms of knowledge that PCK requires. The Certificate in Education (C-in-Ed) and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programs are structured around courses in educational philosophy, psychology, and methods on one hand and subject-matter content on the other, without the systematic subject-specific pedagogical analysis that would develop genuine PCK.

The practical teaching experience component of pre-service programs, through which student teachers observe and practice in real classrooms, is the primary site where PCK development should occur. But the effectiveness of this practice teaching experience depends entirely on the quality of the mentoring and supervision provided during it, and the quality of mentoring in Bangladesh's teacher training system has been consistently identified as inadequate. Student teachers observe mentor teachers who are themselves not necessarily exemplars of effective teaching, receive limited feedback on their own practice teaching, and have insufficient opportunity to reflect systematically on the relationship between subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical approach in the specific content areas they will teach.

1.3 The Reflective Practitioner: Schon's Model and Its Implications

Donald Schon's concept of the "reflective practitioner," developed in his influential books "The Reflective Practitioner" (1983) and "Educating the Reflective Practitioner" (1987), provides a philosophical framework for teacher professional development that has been deeply influential in teacher education internationally and that has specific relevance to Bangladesh's context.

Schon argued that the most important professional knowledge is not the application of established theoretical principles to practice (what he called "technical rationality") but rather "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action": the ability to think about and learn from one's own practice in real time and retrospectively. The reflective practitioner is not primarily a consumer of educational research who applies findings from the academic literature to her classroom. She is a practical researcher who continuously inquires into her own practice, generates hypotheses about what will work with particular students in particular situations, tests these hypotheses in her classroom, and revises her understanding on the basis of what she observes.

The implications of Schon's framework for teacher education are significant. They suggest that teacher preparation should not primarily be organized around the transmission of educational

theory, which is what Bangladesh's teacher training colleges primarily do, but around the development of the reflective habits of mind that will enable teachers to continue learning from their own practice throughout their careers. This requires a fundamentally different kind of teacher education: one organized around systematic reflection on observed practice, on collaborative inquiry into problems of teaching and learning, and on the development of judgment through the iterative cycle of action, observation, and reflection.

The organizational conditions necessary for reflective practice to flourish in Bangladesh's schools are largely absent. Lack of teacher collaboration and peer support are identified as a hindrance in teachers' professional development Daily Observer in Bangladesh. The isolated, privatized, and hierarchical culture of most Bangladeshi school organizations does not support the collaborative professional inquiry that Schon's reflective practitioner model requires. Teachers work in individual classrooms, separated from their colleagues, with limited opportunity for the shared observation, joint planning, and collaborative analysis of student work that would support genuine reflective practice. The cultural norm of teacher authority and student deference, deeply embedded in the traditional conception of the teacher-student relationship, makes it difficult for teachers to adopt the experimental, uncertain, publicly reflective stance that genuine reflective practice requires.

1.4 The Philosophy of Teacher Identity: Vocation, Profession, and Occupation

The question of how teachers understand their own role, what it means to them to be a teacher, and how their professional identity shapes their engagement with their work, is a dimension of teaching philosophy that connects the theoretical and the empirical in important ways. Research on teacher identity, associated with scholars such as Dan Lortie, Andy Hargreaves, Michael Fullan, and more recently with the identity-focused work of educational psychologists like Herbert Marsh, consistently finds that the quality of teaching is significantly shaped by the strength and character of teachers' professional identity.

Dan Lortie's classic sociological study "Schoolteacher" (1975) introduced the concept of "apprenticeship of observation" to describe the primary mechanism through which individuals develop their initial conception of teaching: through the thousands of hours they have spent as students observing teachers. Unlike professionals in most other fields, teachers have had an extended pre-professional apprenticeship in watching the work they will eventually do, though from the wrong side of the desk. This apprenticeship of observation is a double-edged sword: it gives every teacher a wealth of observational experience of teaching practice, but it tends to reproduce the teaching approaches that the future teacher experienced as a student rather than the more sophisticated approaches that teacher education programs aim to develop.

The implications of Lortie's analysis for Bangladesh are immediate. Bangladesh's students observe primarily transmission-oriented, examination-focused, hierarchical teaching throughout their school careers. The future teachers among them observe precisely this model for twelve or more years before entering teacher education programs. When these student teachers arrive at teacher training colleges, the apprenticeship of observation has already shaped their fundamental conception of what teaching is and should be. For teacher education to develop genuinely different pedagogical approaches, it must first overcome the powerful pull of the apprenticeship

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of observation, a task that requires not merely exposure to alternative pedagogical theories but sustained practice with, and mentoring in, alternative pedagogical approaches.

The distinction between teaching as a vocation, a profession, and an occupation is philosophically important for understanding the motivational dynamics of Bangladesh's teaching workforce. A vocation is an activity pursued because of its intrinsic meaning and moral significance; the teacher-as-vocational-practitioner teaches because she is committed to the development of the young people in her care and derives deep satisfaction from that development. A profession is an activity governed by specialized knowledge, professional ethics, and institutional accountability; the teacher-as-professional practices in accordance with established standards, engages in continuing professional learning, and exercises judgment in the application of professional knowledge to specific situations. An occupation is an activity pursued primarily for the material rewards it provides; the teacher-as-occupational-worker teaches because it provides employment, not because of any deeper commitment to the educational enterprise.

In Bangladesh, the conditions that support vocational and professional orientations to teaching have been progressively undermined over the decades. Low and inadequate salaries undermine vocational commitment by signaling that the society does not value the work. Weak professional development systems undermine the professional orientation by denying teachers the knowledge and skills that would support a professional self-conception. The politicization of teacher appointment and the patronage dynamics of teacher deployment undermine professional autonomy by making teachers' positions dependent on political connection rather than professional merit. The result is a teaching workforce in which occupational orientations are common, vocational orientations persist among individual teachers of exceptional commitment, and genuinely professional orientations are rare.

Chapter Two: The Social History of Teaching in Bangladesh: From Guru to Government Employee

2.1 The Pre-Colonial Teacher: Social Embededness and Moral Authority

The social history of teaching in Bangladesh, examined from its pre-colonial origins to its present institutional form, reveals a transformation of the teaching role that is simultaneously a professional development and a cultural impoverishment. The teacher of pre-colonial Bengal, whether the Hindu pundit in the Tol, the Maulvi in the Maktab, or the craftsman-teacher in vocational instruction, occupied a social position that was embedded in the community in ways that the modern government-employed teacher is not.

The pre-colonial teacher derived her authority from a combination of learning, moral character, and community trust that was constituted through the relationship with the community rather than through institutional certification. The village Maulvi was not simply an employee of a religious institution; he was a trusted member of the community whose knowledge, piety, and judgment commanded respect and whose guidance was sought on matters ranging from

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education to dispute resolution to religious guidance. His authority was moral and social, not bureaucratic, and it depended on his sustained cultivation of the qualities of character and learning that the community valued.

This embeddedness in community had significant pedagogical implications. The pre-colonial teacher taught children she knew, in a community whose values and aspirations she shared, using a curriculum that was directly relevant to the lives that students would lead. The Islamic teacher in the Maktab taught children whose parents she knew, who attended the mosque whose congregation she served, and whose futures were bound up with the community's religious and social life. This social embeddedness created accountability mechanisms, though of an informal and relational kind, that no bureaucratic accountability system has subsequently replicated: the teacher who taught badly was answerable to the parents of her students and to the community whose children she was failing, in a direct and immediate way that is absent from the bureaucratic accountability structures of the modern system.

The social status of the teacher in pre-colonial Bengal was high, though differentiated by the type of teacher and the social context. The Brahmin pundit in the Tol commanded the highest social status within the Hindu caste hierarchy. The Maulvi in the Muslim community commanded significant social respect as a repository of religious knowledge. The teacher's material condition was not necessarily comfortable, since teachers depended on the patronage of the community or of wealthy benefactors, but the social honor of the teaching role was substantial and was not primarily understood in economic terms.

2.2 The Colonial Transformation: From Social Embedded Authority to Bureaucratic Employee

The British colonial intervention in education transformed the social position of the teacher in ways that were far-reaching and largely negative. The colonial educational system created a new kind of teacher, the government-certified, institution-employed, salary-receiving teacher, whose authority was bureaucratic rather than community-based, whose certification was institutional rather than the product of community recognition, and whose accountability was upward to the educational bureaucracy rather than outward to the community served.

This transformation had several important consequences. First, it separated the teacher from the community in ways that undermined the social embeddedness of pre-colonial teaching. The colonial teacher was trained in an institution, certified by a bureaucracy, and deployed to a school that was administered by a department rather than governed by the community. The relationship with the local community was no longer constitutive of the teacher's authority; it was at best a peripheral dimension of a role primarily defined by institutional requirements.

Second, the colonial transformation created a hierarchy of teachers based on the level of education and the type of institution, reflecting the colonial system's stratification of knowledge and language. The English-educated teacher in a government high school occupied a much higher social and economic position than the Bengali-medium teacher in a vernacular school, who in turn occupied a higher position than the Madrasa teacher or the non-formal teacher in a

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village school. This hierarchy of teachers mirrored and reinforced the hierarchy of educational types and languages that the colonial system had introduced.

Third, the colonial transformation created a strong association between teaching and the lower echelons of the educated clerical class, an association that has significantly shaped the social prestige of teaching in post-colonial Bangladesh. The colonial system produced, through its "filtration theory" approach, a large number of people with an English education and literacy skills sufficient for lower-level clerical employment in the colonial bureaucracy. Teaching in vernacular schools was, for many of these people, not a first choice but a fallback when clerical positions were not available. This association of teaching with the failure to secure preferred employment established a cultural image of the teacher as someone who could not achieve something better, an image that has proven remarkably persistent in Bangladesh's social imagination despite decades of formal recognition of the "nobility" of the teaching profession.

2.3 Post-Independence Development of the Teaching Profession

The post-independence period brought a formal recognition of teaching as a profession deserving of government support and social esteem, but the material and institutional conditions of the profession improved only gradually and unevenly. The nationalization of primary education in 1973 converted a large number of teachers from community-supported instructors into government employees, simultaneously improving their financial security and breaking the direct community accountability relationship that had governed the pre-colonial and early colonial teaching traditions.

The political history of teacher appointment in post-independence Bangladesh is a study in the politics of public employment. Teaching positions in government schools became, particularly at the primary level in rural areas, highly valued sources of employment precisely because they offered the combination of income security, pension entitlements, and social respect that were rare in rural labor markets. The value of these positions made them attractive as patronage resources, and the allocation of teaching posts on the basis of political connection rather than professional merit became a systemic feature of the employment process.

The Bangladesh Government Primary Teachers Association (BGPTA) and the Bangladesh Primary Teachers Association (BPTA), along with a complex ecosystem of other teacher unions and associations organized along both professional and political lines, developed as significant actors in the political economy of the teaching profession. These organizations have been both advocates for teachers' material interests and political actors with close ties to the two major parties. The political alignment of teacher unions with the BNP or the Awami League has meant that the leadership of these organizations changes with governments, that the unions serve partly as mechanisms for political patronage and mobilization rather than purely as professional advocacy organizations, and that the collective bargaining power of the unions is deployed partly in service of partisan political goals rather than exclusively in service of teachers' professional interests.

The consequence of this politicization of teacher organizations is a weakened capacity for genuinely professional advocacy. A teacher union that is effectively an arm of a political party

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cannot simultaneously serve as an independent voice for professional standards, quality improvement, or educational reform that might be inconvenient for its political patrons. The development of genuinely independent, professionally oriented teacher organizations is therefore an important dimension of the reform of the teaching profession, though it is one that has not received adequate attention in the educational reform literature.

Chapter Three: Pre-Service Teacher Education: The Architecture of Initial Formation

3.1 The Institutional Landscape of Initial Teacher Education

The formal system of initial teacher education in Bangladesh consists of multiple institutional types serving different levels of the school system, organized under different administrative authorities, and providing qualifications of different levels and types. Understanding this institutional landscape is essential for understanding both the current state of teacher preparation and the challenges of improving it.

At the primary level, the primary route to teaching qualification is the Certificate in Education (C-in-Ed), a one-year pre-service qualification provided by the sixty-seven Primary Training Institutes (PTIs) distributed across Bangladesh's districts. The PTI system is under the administrative authority of the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and the National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE), which provides oversight, curriculum development, and quality assurance for the PTI network. The C-in-Ed is a minimum qualification for appointment as a government primary school teacher, though in practice a growing proportion of entrants to primary teaching hold the B.Ed. qualification or higher degrees.

At the secondary level, the primary qualification is the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), a one-year post-graduate qualification provided by the government Teachers' Training Colleges (TTCs) and a growing number of private institutions offering B.Ed. programs. The B.Ed. is the minimum qualification for appointment as a government secondary school teacher. The fourteen government TTCs are distributed across divisions and are under the administrative authority of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) and the National University (NU), which awards the B.Ed. degree. A growing number of private colleges affiliated with the National University also offer B.Ed. programs, with the result that the number of B.Ed. graduates produced annually significantly exceeds the number of teaching positions available, creating a surplus of certified but unemployed teachers.

The National University's role in teacher education is significant and underanalyzed. As the affiliating institution for both the government TTCs and the private colleges offering B.Ed. programs, the National University sets the examination standards and awards the degrees for a very large proportion of Bangladesh's secondary teachers. The quality of the National University's examination system, the rigor of its academic standards for B.Ed. programs, and the extent to which the B.Ed. curriculum is aligned with the actual demands of secondary school teaching are therefore central determinants of the quality of the secondary teaching workforce, yet they receive surprisingly little critical attention in educational reform discussions.

At the higher level, the Institute of Education and Research (IER) at the University of Dhaka offers M.Ed. and PhD programs in education, and several other universities, including BRAC University and the Independent University Bangladesh, have developed education departments offering graduate programs. These higher-level programs serve primarily the small cadre of educational researchers, teacher educators, and educational administrators rather than classroom teachers, and their impact on the quality of classroom teaching, while indirect, is significant through the education of teacher educators and education researchers.

3.2 The C-in-Ed Curriculum: What Primary Teachers Learn and What They Need

The content of the C-in-Ed curriculum, through which the vast majority of Bangladesh's primary teachers receive their formal professional preparation, is a central determinant of primary teaching quality and deserves careful analysis. The C-in-Ed program is organized over one academic year of approximately forty weeks, divided between coursework at the PTI and a period of practical school experience. The coursework covers a range of topics including educational psychology, educational philosophy, primary level subject teaching methods, child development, classroom management, and evaluation and assessment.

Several specific structural problems with the C-in-Ed curriculum have been consistently identified in evaluation research. The first and most fundamental is the one-year duration of the program, which is insufficient for the development of the complex professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions that effective primary teaching requires. One year provides enough time for a superficial introduction to educational theory and some basic pedagogical methods, but it does not provide the sustained practice, feedback, and reflection necessary for genuine professional competence to develop. In Bangladesh, there is currently no systematic process for recruiting and training of pre-service teachers, The Business Standard which means that the formal one-year program is often the only significant professional preparation that primary teachers receive before taking responsibility for a classroom full of children.

The second structural problem is the disconnect between the theoretical curriculum and the reality of primary school practice. The C-in-Ed curriculum is designed as if Bangladesh's primary classrooms were well-resourced environments with small class sizes, where the pedagogical techniques taught in the PTI could be straightforwardly applied. The reality, as generations of newly trained primary teachers discover on their first posting, is typically the opposite: overcrowded classrooms in sometimes deteriorated physical environments, with limited materials and minimal administrative support. The psychological shock of this encounter between training and reality, which researchers have called "reality shock" or "induction crisis," is a major contributor to early attrition from the profession and to the abandonment of pedagogical approaches learned in training in favor of the transmission-and-memorization approach that seems to cope more manageably with the actual conditions of the classroom.

The third problem is the quality of instruction in the PTIs themselves. PTI instructors are themselves teachers who have been promoted into training roles, not necessarily because of any particular expertise in teacher education but because of seniority and administrative performance. The pedagogical practices of PTI instructors often mirror the transmission-oriented approaches that the C-in-Ed curriculum theoretically advocates against: lectures, note-taking, and

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examination-focused instruction rather than the modeling of constructivist, activity-based pedagogical approaches. A teacher education program that aspires to develop constructivist teachers but uses transmission-oriented pedagogy in its own instruction is a program that teaches practice far more effectively than theory.

3.3 The B.Ed. Program and the Formation of Secondary Teachers

The one-year Bachelor of Education program through which secondary teachers are prepared shares many of the structural limitations of the C-in-Ed, but its specific organization and institutional context create their own distinctive challenges. The B.Ed. as currently organized is a post-graduation qualification: candidates must already hold a bachelor's degree in a subject area before entering the B.Ed. program. This structure implies that subject-matter knowledge is developed separately from pedagogical knowledge, with the B.Ed. responsible only for the latter. The result is a program that is pedagogically focused but lacks integration with subject-matter understanding, producing the opposite of the PCK integration that Shulman's framework shows to be essential for effective teaching.

The one-year duration of the B.Ed. is widely acknowledged in Bangladesh's educational research community as inadequate. A survey of B.Ed. graduates conducted by the Institute of Education and Research at the University of Dhaka found that the majority felt inadequately prepared by the B.Ed. to meet the actual challenges of secondary classroom teaching, particularly in respect of classroom management, differentiated instruction for diverse learners, and the use of formative assessment to guide teaching decisions. These findings are consistent with the international evidence that one-year post-graduate teacher education programs are insufficient for the development of professional teaching competence, particularly in contexts where the contrast between the idealized classroom of training and the complex reality of the actual classroom is very large.

The quality assurance of B.Ed. programs in private teacher training colleges affiliated with the National University is a particular concern. The rapid expansion of private B.Ed. provision since the 2000s, driven by the large surplus demand for B.Ed. qualifications in a context where a government teaching position is a highly sought employment outcome, has produced a large number of private colleges offering B.Ed. programs of highly variable quality. Some of these institutions offer programs of acceptable quality with adequate physical facilities, qualified staff, and genuine academic standards. Others are effectively credential mills, offering the minimum required contact hours, employing adjunct instructors of limited qualifications, and providing the examination preparation necessary to pass the National University B.Ed. examination without the genuine professional learning that the examination is supposed to certify.

The National University's capacity to quality-assure the B.Ed. programs of its hundreds of affiliated colleges is severely limited. The University does not have the staff, the resources, or the institutional culture of quality assurance necessary to monitor the actual quality of instruction in affiliated institutions. Its primary quality assurance mechanism is the examination, which certifies whether candidates can pass a written test of educational theory knowledge but does not assess the pedagogical competence, reflective capacity, or classroom performance that genuine professional teacher qualification should certify.

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3.4 The Pedagogy of Teacher Education: A Structural Contradiction

Perhaps the most revealing contradiction in Bangladesh's teacher education system is the gap between the pedagogical approaches that teacher education programs advocate and the pedagogical approaches they practice. Teacher education programs in Bangladesh consistently advocate, in their formal curriculum documents and theoretical content, for learner-centered, constructivist, activity-based, critical-thinking-oriented pedagogical approaches. They consistently practice, in their own instruction of teacher candidates, transmission-oriented, teacher-centered, examination-focused approaches that are the antithesis of what they theoretically recommend.

This structural contradiction is not unique to Bangladesh. John Loughran, one of the world's foremost authorities on teacher education, has documented extensively what he calls "the practice problem" in teacher education: the tendency for teacher educators to advocate pedagogical approaches that they do not themselves model, sending a hidden curriculum message to teacher candidates that the advocated approaches are for policy documents rather than actual classrooms. The damage done by this hidden curriculum is significant: teacher candidates learn most powerfully from what they observe, and if what they observe in their teacher education program is transmission-oriented pedagogy, they will be powerfully inclined to reproduce it in their own classrooms.

The resolution of this structural contradiction requires teacher education programs to take seriously the principle of "teaching about teaching through teaching": demonstrating the pedagogical approaches they advocate by using those approaches in the education of teacher candidates. A constructivist teacher education program would organize its curriculum around problems and inquiries rather than lectures, would assess teacher candidates through demonstrations of pedagogical competence rather than written examinations of theoretical knowledge, and would create the collaborative professional learning community that it advocates as the conditions for teacher growth. This is a demanding standard, but it is the standard that the rhetoric of Bangladesh's teacher education system implicitly sets for itself without consistently meeting.

Chapter Four: In-Service Teacher Development: The Architecture of Professional Growth

4.1 The System of In-Service Training: NAPE, NAEM, and the Problem of Reach

The in-service professional development of teachers, the continuous development of professional knowledge and skill throughout a teacher's career, is theoretically as important as pre-service preparation, since most of the improvement in teacher effectiveness that is achievable through professional development occurs not before but during the career. Bangladesh has developed a formal system of in-service teacher professional development (TPD) organized primarily through two national academies: the National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE) for primary teachers, and the National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM) for school managers

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and educational administrators. These are supplemented by divisional and district-level training centers and by the PTI network's in-service provision.

NAPE, established in 1978 and based in Mymensingh, is the primary institution for the professional development of primary school teachers and teacher educators. Its mandate includes conducting in-service training programs for primary teachers and PTI instructors, developing training materials and resources, conducting research on primary education, and evaluating teacher training programs. NAEM, established in 1959 as the Education Extension Centre and renamed in 1986, provides training for school heads, educational administrators at all levels, and educational officials.

The fundamental challenge facing both institutions is one of scale and reach. Bangladesh has approximately three hundred thousand primary school teachers and approximately four hundred thousand secondary school teachers. Providing meaningful, sustained in-service professional development to this workforce through centralized or even divisional training institutions is a logistical challenge of extraordinary magnitude. Even if every training day at NAPE and NAEM were used at full capacity, the total training provision available would cover only a tiny fraction of the teaching workforce in any given year, and the training provided in intensive short-term residential courses, which is the primary format of formal in-service training in Bangladesh, has a notoriously limited impact on sustained pedagogical change.

The research on the effectiveness of the traditional model of teacher in-service training, the one-off or occasional intensive workshop or residential training course, is consistent and discouraging. Michael Fullan, whose work on educational change has been enormously influential, summarizes this research: one-shot, decontextualized training workshops have minimal impact on teachers' classroom practice because they do not provide the sustained coaching, peer support, and practice opportunity that behavioral change requires. The training may produce short-term changes in knowledge and attitude, but these changes do not translate into durable changes in classroom practice in the absence of the follow-up support and accountability structures that convert knowledge of good practice into habitual good practice.

4.2 The Teacher Portal and Technology-Enabled Professional Development

The recognition of the limitations of the traditional intensive training model has driven interest in technology-enabled approaches to teacher professional development, both globally and in Bangladesh. The Teacher Portal, developed by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education with technical and financial support from international partners, represents Bangladesh's most ambitious attempt to use digital technology to scale professional development to the full primary teaching workforce.

The Teacher Portal provides online professional development resources, including video demonstrations of effective teaching, reflective case studies, subject-specific pedagogical resources, and interactive learning modules, accessible to teachers through smartphone or computer with internet connectivity. The initiative recognizes both the logistical impossibility of reaching every teacher through face-to-face training and the growing digital connectivity that makes online resources accessible in increasingly remote areas of Bangladesh.

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Bangladesh's move towards blended TPD for its one-million-strong teacher workforce is showing great promise, enabling teachers to have more time in the classroom and supportive materials. This transition to blended TPD is heavily facilitated by nearly two thousand five hundred tech-savvy teacher ambassadors, acting as change agents within teacher communities. UNFPA-Bangladesh

The implementation challenges of the Teacher Portal are, however, significant. Unequal distribution of technology access, particularly in urban and rural areas, is quite prominent in low- and middle-income countries and presents a significant challenge for scaling TPD. Factors including slow internet speed, high costs, insufficient equipment, and frequent power outages prevent teachers from accessing the platform. UNFPA-Bangladesh

The design of effective online professional development resources is also a sophisticated challenge that the Teacher Portal has not always met. The most common approach is to convert the content of face-to-face training workshops into digital formats: video lectures, reading materials, and quiz-based assessments. But this approach reproduces in digital form the limitations of traditional training provision: passive consumption of content without the practical application, peer discussion, and coaching that learning science research shows to be necessary for professional learning. The most effective online professional development combines digital resources with facilitated peer learning, coaching from more experienced teachers, and structured observation and reflection on classroom practice: a blend of digital and human elements that requires both technological and human investment.

4.3 School-Based Professional Development: The Community of Practice Model

The research on effective teacher professional development consistently identifies school-based, job-embedded, collaborative professional learning as more effective than externally provided, centre-based training. The community of practice model, associated with the work of Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave, describes the kind of professional learning that occurs when practitioners who share a common professional context collaborate in inquiry about their shared practice, bringing their diverse knowledge and experience to bear on common problems and developing shared understanding through collective reflection and experimentation.

Applied to teacher professional development, the community of practice model suggests that the most effective professional learning occurs when teachers within the same school or cluster of schools meet regularly to examine their own teaching practice, analyse student learning outcomes, develop and test new instructional approaches, and build collectively on the knowledge gained through this collaborative inquiry. This model, often described as "professional learning communities" (PLCs), "lesson study" (in the Japanese tradition), or "collaborative teacher inquiry," has been implemented with impressive results in a range of contexts, from the Lesson Study tradition in Japan and Singapore to the PLCs implemented in many high-performing school systems internationally.

Bangladesh's school organization does not currently support the development of genuine professional learning communities in most schools. The structural conditions necessary for PLCs to function, including protected time for collaborative professional work within the school day,

norms of professional trust and openness to peer observation and feedback, teacher leadership capacity within schools, and a school culture that values professional learning, are largely absent. The hierarchical culture of most school organizations in Bangladesh, in which the principal is the unquestioned authority and horizontal professional relationships among teachers are limited, is inhospitable to the flat, collaborative, inquiry-oriented culture that PLCs require.

The development of PLCs in Bangladesh's schools would require a fundamental shift in the culture of school leadership, from the command-and-control model that currently dominates to a collaborative, learning-oriented model in which the principal is a facilitator of professional learning rather than a bureaucratic supervisor. This shift in school leadership culture cannot be achieved through training alone; it requires changes in the selection and preparation of school leaders, changes in the accountability and performance management frameworks within which they work, and changes in the relationship between schools and the educational bureaucracy that currently exercises close directive oversight over school management.

4.4 The Teacher Ambassador Program and Peer Learning Networks

One of the most promising recent developments in Bangladesh's teacher professional development system is the Teacher Ambassador program, developed as part of the implementation of the 2023 curriculum reform. The transformation of the teachers' role from sages to guides requires mental rewiring and cultural disruption, which must go through consistent behavioral nudges by the teacher educators and educational administration. The Daily Star The Teacher Ambassador program identifies and trains a cadre of highly capable and enthusiastic teachers in each district to serve as peer mentors and change agents within their teaching communities. These "super-teachers" provide support, demonstration, and encouragement to their colleagues in the adoption of new pedagogical approaches, supplementing and complementing the more formal training provided through PTIs and TTCs.

The theoretical rationale for the Teacher Ambassador approach is sound. Research on change in educational systems consistently finds that peer influence, particularly from respected colleagues within the same institutional context, is more effective in changing practice than external expert advice. A colleague who is working in the same school system, facing the same resource constraints and institutional pressures, and who has demonstrated that it is possible to implement new approaches successfully in this context, has a credibility and relevance that an external trainer, however expert, cannot match.

The practical effectiveness of the Teacher Ambassador program depends critically on the selection, training, and ongoing support of the ambassadors themselves. If ambassadors are selected primarily on the basis of political connection or administrative performance rather than pedagogical excellence and communication skill, the program will fail to achieve its purpose. If ambassadors are given initial training but no ongoing support, their effectiveness will diminish as they encounter resistance and complexity in the field. And if the program is not adequately resourced, with protected time for ambassadors to fulfill their mentoring role and compensation for the additional responsibility they carry, it will be unsustainable.

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The evidence base on teacher ambassador and peer coaching programs globally, while encouraging in principle, is mixed in practice. Programs that have been successfully implemented share several features: rigorous selection of ambassadors based on pedagogical effectiveness rather than seniority or political connection; comprehensive initial training that develops both subject-specific pedagogical expertise and mentoring and facilitation skills; protected time and adequate compensation for the ambassador role; systematic monitoring of program implementation and outcomes; and integration of the ambassador program with the broader professional development and accountability systems of the school and district.

Chapter Five: The Political Economy of Teaching: Pay, Conditions, and the Structural Determinants of Quality

5.1 Teacher Salaries and the Economics of Professional Attractiveness

The salary structure of Bangladesh's teaching workforce is perhaps the most fundamental determinant of the profession's ability to attract and retain high-quality individuals, and it is therefore the most fundamental determinant of teaching quality in the system as a whole. The relationship between teacher salaries and the quality of individuals who choose to enter and remain in teaching is not mechanistic: there are teachers of exceptional commitment and quality at every salary level, and there are mediocre teachers who are highly paid. But the structural tendency is clear: in a labor market with alternatives, professions that pay relatively poorly attract less qualified candidates and lose their best performers to better-paying alternatives.

Bangladesh's teacher salaries, examined in relation to the salaries of comparable professionals and in relation to the cost of living, present a complicated picture that has changed significantly over time. Primary school teachers' salaries have improved substantially since independence, driven by successive revisions to the government pay scale and by the political advocacy of teacher unions. The National Pay Scale revisions of 2009 and 2015 brought measurable improvements in teachers' nominal compensation, and the Eighth Pay Scale, which came into effect in 2015, is the most recent comprehensive revision. A primary school teacher at the entry level under the Eighth Pay Scale earns a basic salary that, with various allowances, provides a modest but not wholly inadequate income in rural areas.

However, the relative position of teachers' salaries in the labor market for educated workers has declined significantly as Bangladesh's economy has grown and as the private sector has developed a wide range of professional employment opportunities with substantially better compensation. A young person with the qualifications required for primary school teaching, a B.Ed. or higher, has numerous alternatives in the rapidly growing private sector, including positions in the garment industry's management tier, in the banking sector, in telecommunications, in IT, and in the NGO sector, all of which typically offer better initial salaries, better career advancement prospects, and in many cases better working conditions than government school teaching.

The teaching profession in Bangladesh is often undervalued, characterized by low salaries and limited prospects for career advancement. This lack of motivation has resulted in a deficit of qualified teachers, especially in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Bdeduarticle

The salary disadvantage of teaching relative to private sector alternatives is particularly acute for science and mathematics teachers at the secondary level. A science or mathematics graduate with a B.Sc. and a B.Ed. who enters secondary school teaching will earn a government salary that is substantially lower than she could earn as a software developer, a banker, or a private sector manager. The result is that science and mathematics teaching positions are increasingly difficult to fill with well-qualified candidates, particularly in urban areas where private sector employment opportunities are most abundant.

The structure of teachers' career earnings is also problematic. The government pay scale for teachers is highly compressed, with limited differentiation between entry-level and experienced teachers and between effective and ineffective teachers. A teacher who joins the profession at twenty-five and teaches for thirty-five years until retirement will see modest nominal salary increases through automatic seniority increments, but her real salary progression will be limited and will bear no systematic relationship to the quality of her teaching. This structure provides no financial incentive for the development of teaching excellence, and it removes the primary mechanism through which most professions retain and reward their best performers: differentiated compensation linked to performance.

5.2 The Private Tutoring Economy and Its Implications for Teacher Integrity

The relationship between teachers' inadequate government salaries and the thriving private tutoring economy is one of the most thoroughly documented and most persistently problematic features of Bangladesh's educational landscape. The practice of teachers providing private tutoring to students, including their own students, for fees that substantially supplement their government salaries, is widespread across the primary, secondary, and in some cases tertiary levels of the system.

The economics of private tutoring from the teacher's perspective are straightforward. A secondary school teacher earning a government salary that is insufficient for comfortable urban living can earn two or three times her government salary through private tutoring in the evenings and on weekends. The demand for private tutoring is generated by the pressure of the examination system, the inadequacy of classroom instruction, and the competitive dynamics of university admission. The teacher is therefore in a position where providing poor-quality classroom instruction while reserving her best pedagogical effort for privately paid students is financially rational, even if it is professionally and ethically indefensible.

This practice, which educational economists call "cream-skimming" or "moonlighting," has been documented in varying degrees across many developing countries. In Bangladesh, it appears to be particularly prevalent and particularly damaging to educational quality. The most able students, whose families can afford the fees for good private tutors, effectively receive two educational systems: an inadequate public provision supplemented by a private provision that is

intensive, targeted, and examination-focused. The least able students, whose families cannot afford private tutoring, receive only the inadequate public provision, which is further degraded by the diversion of teacher effort toward the private tutoring economy.

The ethical dimension of private tutoring of one's own students deserves moral philosophical analysis that goes beyond the consequentialist calculation of its effects on educational inequality. A teacher who provides deliberately inadequate classroom instruction in order to create demand for her private tutoring services is engaging in a form of fraud: she is receiving a government salary for a service she is not providing in good faith, and she is exploiting the vulnerability of the families who depend on public education because they cannot afford alternatives. This is not merely an economic inefficiency. It is a moral violation of the trust relationship between teacher and community that Al-Ghazali's educational ethics, among others, identifies as the foundational obligation of the teaching profession.

5.3 Absenteeism and the Problem of Accountability

Teacher absenteeism, the failure of teachers to appear at school and to provide instruction during scheduled teaching time, is one of the most costly and pervasive problems in Bangladesh's educational system. Research conducted by the World Bank, BRAC, and the DPE consistently documents rates of teacher absence from classrooms of twenty to thirty percent, meaning that on any given school day approximately one-fifth to one-third of teachers who should be in classrooms are absent. This rate of absence, multiplied across the entire teaching workforce and across the full school year, represents an extraordinary waste of both public resources and students' learning time.

The structural causes of teacher absenteeism are well-documented. The inadequacy of teacher salaries creates incentives for teachers to use their time in income-supplementing activities, including private tutoring, agricultural work, and other employment. The weakness of monitoring and accountability structures in the school administration system means that absenteeism carries very limited consequences for teachers. The distance between remote rural schools and the teachers who are posted to them, many of whom prefer to live in nearby towns rather than in the villages where their schools are located, makes regular attendance physically costly and monitoring practically difficult.

By 2024, the percentage of trained and qualified teachers in public institutions stood at approximately fifty-five percent. The Daily Star This figure, combined with the absenteeism data, means that the effective teaching provision in Bangladesh's government schools is substantially lower than the nominal provision, creating a gap between the educational entitlement that students formally have and the educational experience they actually receive.

The accountability mechanisms for teacher attendance in Bangladesh's public school system are weak at every level. School principals, who are nominally responsible for monitoring teacher attendance, often lack the institutional authority or the personal inclination to enforce discipline in colleagues over whom they may have limited formal power. The Upazila Education Officer, who is responsible for supervising and monitoring schools in the sub-district, typically has responsibility for too many schools with too little administrative support to conduct the regular

monitoring visits that effective oversight would require. The distance between the individual classroom and the ministerial level at which the political will for accountability reform would need to be generated is, in Bangladesh's highly centralized administrative system, enormous.

5.4 Teacher Deployment and the Geography of Inequality

The deployment of teachers, the assignment of qualified teachers to specific schools and positions, is a major determinant of the geographical distribution of educational quality. In Bangladesh, as in many developing countries, the pattern of teacher deployment systematically disadvantages the most remote and underserved schools and communities. The mechanisms that produce this pattern are well-understood: better-qualified teachers prefer postings in urban and peri-urban areas where living conditions are better, supplementary income opportunities are available, family members can be accommodated, and career development opportunities are more accessible. The political and administrative networks through which teaching positions are allocated tend to route better positions to politically connected applicants, who are disproportionately from more advantaged backgrounds and prefer urban locations. The result is that rural government schools in remote areas, which serve the most disadvantaged students and which have the greatest need for high-quality teaching, consistently receive the least qualified and least experienced teachers.

The geographical inequality of teacher deployment compounds the other dimensions of educational inequality that Parts Two and Three of this commentary document. A child in a remote char in the Brahmaputra delta or in a village in the Chittagong Hill Tracts attends a school where the teacher is less likely to be present, less likely to be qualified, less likely to have access to professional development resources, and less likely to be professionally motivated than a child in an urban middle-class school. This teacher quality dimension of geographical inequality receives insufficient attention in discussions of educational equity that focus primarily on physical infrastructure and material resources.

Policy responses to the geographical inequality of teacher deployment have included financial incentives for postings to remote and disadvantaged areas (hardship allowances), administrative posting rules that require teachers to serve a period in rural postings before urban transfer, and community-based teacher recruitment approaches that seek to recruit teachers from the communities in which schools are located. These measures have had limited effectiveness, in part because the financial incentives offered are too small to significantly alter the preferences of well-qualified teachers, in part because administrative posting rules are frequently circumvented through political connection and informal network influence, and in part because community recruitment approaches, while addressing the deployment problem, may not address the quality problem if community members who become teachers are not of higher quality than externally recruited teachers.

Chapter Six: Psychological Dimensions of Teaching in Bangladesh: Identity, Burnout, and Resilience

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6.1 Teacher Motivation Theory and Its Application to Bangladesh

The psychology of teacher motivation has been extensively studied in educational research, drawing on general motivation theory from psychology and applying it to the specific conditions of the teaching profession. The dominant frameworks include self-determination theory (discussed in Part Four in the context of student motivation), expectancy-value theory (which holds that motivation is a function of the expected success at and the value attached to a specific activity), and achievement goal theory (which distinguishes between mastery goals, oriented toward learning and understanding, and performance goals, oriented toward demonstrating superior ability relative to others).

Applied to teacher motivation in Bangladesh, these frameworks converge on a troubling diagnosis. The conditions of teaching in Bangladesh's public school system are structured in ways that consistently undermine the psychological foundations of intrinsic motivation. The autonomy dimension of self-determination theory is violated by a highly centralized, prescriptive curriculum and examination system that leaves teachers minimal room for professional judgment about how to teach. The competence dimension is undermined by inadequate training and professional support that leaves teachers feeling unprepared and ineffective. The relatedness dimension is undermined by isolated, non-collaborative school cultures that deprive teachers of the professional community that sustains professional commitment.

Expectancy-value theory points to a different but complementary dimension of motivational problem. The expectancy component, the degree to which teachers believe their efforts will produce learning outcomes, is undermined by the very high prevalence of students with inadequate pre-school preparation, by overcrowded classrooms in difficult physical conditions, and by the limited leverage that any individual teacher has over the many factors, including family poverty, domestic violence, child labor, and health, that affect learning outcomes. When teachers believe that their effort does not make a significant difference to outcomes, their effort understandably diminishes. This phenomenon, familiar in the educational psychology literature as "learned helplessness" or "efficacy depletion," is a significant contributor to the low motivation and pedagogical passivity documented in many studies of Bangladeshi classroom practice.

6.2 Burnout in the Teaching Profession

Teacher burnout, defined in the clinical psychology literature as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment resulting from chronic work-related stress, is a significant but underresearched problem in Bangladesh's educational system. The conditions of teaching in Bangladesh's public schools, particularly at the primary level in disadvantaged areas, are objectively stressful: large class sizes, poor physical facilities, demanding curriculum requirements, inadequate pay, limited social support, and the psychological burden of working with children from very difficult home circumstances, all constitute chronic stressors that, without adequate resources for coping, lead to the exhaustion and disengagement that characterize burnout.

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The limited research available on teacher wellbeing in Bangladesh, conducted primarily by BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division and by researchers at the IER at the University of Dhaka, documents significant levels of stress and job dissatisfaction among primary and secondary teachers, particularly those in rural government schools. Qualitative research finds teachers who describe their work as physically exhausting, emotionally draining, and professionally unrewarding, and who have developed coping strategies of emotional detachment from their students that limit their professional effectiveness.

The phenomenon of burnout in teaching has significant implications for educational quality. A teacher who has experienced emotional exhaustion and depersonalization does not teach badly by choice; she teaches badly because she no longer has the emotional resources to engage fully with the work. Her reduced personal accomplishment, the sense that her efforts do not produce meaningful outcomes, becomes a self-reinforcing perception that reduces her effort and thereby reduces the outcomes that would challenge the perception. This cycle of burnout and quality deterioration is not addressable through accountability measures that penalize underperformance without addressing the structural conditions that produce burnout. Punishing the burnt-out teacher for teaching badly is both unjust and ineffective; the appropriate response is to address the structural stressors that produced the burnout.

6.3 Teacher Resilience and the Conditions That Sustain Professional Commitment

Against the diagnosis of low motivation and potential burnout, it is important to acknowledge and analyze the resilience and professional commitment that many Bangladeshi teachers display in the face of difficult conditions. The research literature on teacher resilience, developed by scholars including Christopher Day, Qing Gu, and Andy Hargreaves, identifies the personal and contextual resources that enable teachers to maintain professional commitment and pedagogical quality in challenging circumstances.

At the personal level, resilience resources include a strong sense of professional identity and vocation, personal values and beliefs that provide meaning and purpose in the work, established strategies for managing stress and maintaining work-life balance, and the capacity to draw on personal life experience as a resource for professional renewal. Many Bangladeshi teachers, particularly those who enter teaching with a genuine vocational commitment, display these personal resilience resources to a remarkable degree, sustaining professional engagement and genuine care for their students across careers in which the institutional conditions are persistently unsupportive.

At the contextual level, resilience resources include supportive collegial relationships, a positive school culture, a supportive principal, access to professional development, recognition and appreciation from students and families, and a sense of being part of a larger professional and social mission. The absence of these contextual resources in many of Bangladesh's public schools is a significant factor in the erosion of professional commitment and resilience over time.

Bangladesh's Partnership Compact aligns partners and resources with the national priority reform, which aims to address the lack of quality training that has rendered the profession less attractive and adversely affected student learning. Targeted outputs include supporting teachers

with professional development, providing them with a support network and supervision system, and enhancing training institutes to improve student learning. ERIC

This recognition by the Global Partnership for Education of the importance of support networks and supervision systems alongside technical training reflects a more sophisticated understanding of teacher development than the earlier technocratic approaches, which focused exclusively on knowledge transmission in training events. The integration of professional community, peer support, and organizational mentoring into the professional development framework is a step in the right direction, even if the specific mechanisms for building this community in Bangladesh's dispersed and institutionally isolated school system remain to be fully developed.

6.4 The Emotional Labor of Teaching and its Cultural Dimensions

The sociologist Arlie Hochschild introduced the concept of "emotional labor" to describe the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display, required as part of work in service occupations. Teaching is quintessentially an emotional labor profession: teachers are required to manage complex emotional dynamics in their classrooms, to maintain appropriate emotional registers in relationships with students of widely varying backgrounds and capabilities, and to exercise the kind of emotional intelligence and empathy that effective pedagogy requires.

The emotional labor demands of teaching in Bangladesh's specific context are substantial and culturally particular. The cultural expectations of the teacher-student relationship in Bangladesh, which emphasize deference, respect for authority, and emotional restraint, create a specific emotional register for classroom interaction that is quite different from the more emotionally expressive, dialogic relationships that constructivist pedagogy advocates. The teacher who is culturally expected to maintain authority and emotional distance while simultaneously developing the warm, trusting, student-centered pedagogical relationship that learning science research recommends faces a genuine cultural contradiction that has no easy resolution.

The management of this cultural contradiction is itself a form of emotional labor that adds to the psychological demands of teaching. The teacher who adopts a more student-centered, dialogic pedagogical style may face resistance not only from students who are accustomed to more directive teaching but from parents who interpret student-centered approaches as a failure of discipline and authority, from colleagues who see them as a departure from professional norms, and from school administrators who perceive them as a threat to institutional order. Navigating these multiple sources of institutional and cultural resistance while maintaining commitment to pedagogically effective approaches requires considerable psychological resilience and the kind of professional identity security that comes from a strong vocational commitment and a supportive professional community.

Chapter Seven: Teaching in the Madrasa System: A Parallel Professional World

7.1 The Madrasa Teacher: Social Role, Professional Formation, and Institutional Context

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The teaching profession in Bangladesh's Madrasa system constitutes a parallel professional world that is both deeply connected to and significantly different from the general education teaching profession. The Aliya Madrasa system, with its government-recognized curriculum and public examination system, employs teachers whose professional formation and institutional context share features with general system teachers while also differing in important respects. The Qawmi Madrasa system, with its entirely independent institutional structure, employs teachers whose professional formation and institutional culture are fundamentally different from both the Aliya system and the general system.

The Aliya Madrasa teacher occupies a dual professional identity that is in some respects more complex than that of the general system teacher. She must be competent in both the Islamic religious subjects that are the defining character of the Madrasa curriculum and in the secular subjects (Bengali, English, mathematics, science, social studies) that are required components of the Aliya curriculum for the government examinations. The preparation for this dual competence is provided through the Aliya Madrasa system's own teacher education institutions, primarily the government Madrasas Teachers' Training Institute, which offers programs analogous to the general system's TTCs.

The social position of the Aliya Madrasa teacher within the Muslim community is distinct from that of the general system teacher and commands a specific form of social respect associated with religious learning and piety. The teacher of Islamic religious subjects in the Madrasa is not merely an occupational employee but an inheritor and transmitter of the Islamic scholarly tradition, a role that carries religious significance and social honor independent of the material rewards of the position.

The Qawmi Madrasa teacher represents the most distinctive pedagogical tradition in Bangladesh's educational landscape. The Qawmi teacher, typically a graduate of the Dawra-e-Hadith course, has received an education of great depth in the classical Islamic scholarly tradition but with very limited exposure to modern secular knowledge, educational psychology, or pedagogical theory. Her teaching practice is organized around the established methods of traditional Islamic education: the master-apprentice relationship (ustaz-shagird), the systematic study of classical texts (kitab), the teacher's exposition and the student's memorization and recitation, and the development of the student's capacity for independent textual interpretation over years of sustained study.

7.2 The Pedagogical Methods of the Classical Madrasa Tradition

The pedagogical methods of the classical Madrasa tradition are not simply primitive or inferior to modern educational approaches. They are sophisticated and time-tested methods for achieving specific educational goals within a specific educational philosophy, and they deserve analytical engagement rather than dismissal. The classical methods include Al-sama' (listening and auditory learning through recitation and repetition), Al-Qira'a (reading and textual study), Al-Munazara (formal disputation and debate on theological and juridical questions), Al-Imla' (dictation and note-taking), and Al-Muthala'a (independent study and personal revision).

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The classical Madrasa's emphasis on memorization, particularly the memorization of the Quran and of key classical texts, has been criticized by modern educational theorists as an example of the lowest level of Bloom's taxonomy and as incompatible with the development of higher-order thinking. This criticism deserves a more nuanced response than it typically receives. The memorization practices of the traditional Madrasa are not oriented toward the temporary storage of information for examination reproduction, which is what modern "rote memorization" typically means. They are oriented toward the internalization of sacred texts in ways that make them permanently and immediately available as resources for reflection, application, and spiritual practice. The student who has memorized the Quran has not simply stored four hundred pages of text in retrievable memory; she has internalized a comprehensive guide to her religious, moral, and spiritual life in a way that is permanently and immediately accessible in any situation where guidance is needed.

Nevertheless, the classical Madrasa methods, even at their best, do not develop all of the cognitive capabilities that education in a modern society requires. The emphasis on text-based learning, while producing graduates of exceptional literary and rhetorical sophistication in the classical languages, does not develop the empirical reasoning, quantitative analysis, and scientific thinking that participation in the modern economy and democratic governance requires. And the disputational method, Al-Munazara, while developing sophisticated skills of argumentation within the established framework of Islamic jurisprudence, is not the same as the critical thinking that questions the framework itself.

The integration of modern scientific and analytical education into the Madrasa curriculum without destroying the distinctive character of the classical Islamic scholarly tradition is one of the most important and most difficult educational challenges in Bangladesh. It is a challenge that has been approached differently by different Islamic reform movements: the Deoband school's cautious and limited accommodation of modern subjects, the Aligarh movement's more thoroughgoing integration of modern and Islamic education, and the various hybrid approaches attempted by the Aliya Madrasa system, all represent different answers to the question of how much integration is desirable and how it should be achieved. This is not a question with a single correct answer; it is a genuinely contested philosophical and theological question about the relationship between Islamic and secular knowledge.

7.3 The Feminization of Madrasa Education and the Female Teacher

One of the most significant recent developments in Bangladesh's Madrasa system is the rapid growth of female Madrasa education, both in enrollment of female students and in the employment of female teachers. Historically, the Madrasa system was almost entirely male in both its student body and its teaching faculty, reflecting the traditional view that higher Islamic education was primarily a male domain. The expansion of female Madrasa enrollment since the 1990s, driven by both increasing social demand for Islamic education for girls and by the development of dedicated female Madrasa institutions, has created a substantial new workforce of female Madrasa teachers.

The professional formation and social position of female Madrasa teachers is a genuinely underresearched area that deserves more systematic attention. Female graduates of higher

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Madrasa education, who have completed rigorous training in Islamic religious subjects, occupy a social position that is simultaneously constrained by the patriarchal norms of conservative Islamic communities and empowered by the religious knowledge and authority that Madrasa education confers. The female Madrasa teacher is not simply a feminized version of the male Madrasa teacher; her authority is differently constructed, her pedagogical relationship with female students is differently constituted, and her social position in the community has a specific character that reflects both the increasing public role of educated women in Bangladesh and the specific religious context of Madrasa education.

The professional development needs of female Madrasa teachers are distinct from those of male Madrasa teachers and from those of female teachers in the general system. A professional development framework that adequately addresses these needs must engage with the specific theological, pedagogical, and social dimensions of female Islamic education in Bangladesh, drawing on the growing body of Islamic feminist educational scholarship that has developed internationally and on the specific experience of female Madrasa educators in Bangladesh.

Chapter Eight: Teacher Education Reform: International Models and Bangladesh's Options

8.1 The Finnish Model of Teacher Education: Selection, Research, and Autonomy

The Finnish model of teacher education, which has attracted more international attention than any other teacher education system in the world, is organized around three central principles: highly selective entry to the profession, research-based teacher preparation at the master's degree level, and genuine professional autonomy for teachers once they are in the classroom. Understanding the Finnish model in its institutional specificity, and identifying which elements are potentially transferable to Bangladesh's context, is an important exercise for educational reform planning.

The selection principle in Finland is implemented through a highly competitive admission process for teacher education programs: only approximately one in ten applicants is admitted to primary teacher education programs in Finnish universities, making teaching one of the most competitive career choices available to Finnish graduates. This selectivity is achieved and maintained by the high social status and the good working conditions of teaching in Finland: teaching is a first-choice career for many of Finland's best graduates, not a fallback option. The result is that Finnish teacher education programs can apply genuinely demanding selection criteria because the applicant pool is large and high-quality.

The application of the Finnish selection principle to Bangladesh requires confronting a fundamental challenge: the selection principle cannot function as a quality filter without a large and high-quality applicant pool, and the quality of that pool depends on the attractiveness of the profession, which in turn depends on the salaries, status, and working conditions that Bangladesh's teaching profession currently does not provide. The Finnish model is not a recipe

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that can be mechanically applied to Bangladesh; it is the outcome of a long historical process of social valuation of the teaching profession that Bangladesh has not yet undertaken.

The research-based principle in Finland means that Finnish teacher education programs, located in universities, ground teacher preparation in the systematic study of educational research, in the development of research skills, and in the expectation that teachers will engage in and contribute to educational research throughout their careers. Finnish teachers are educated to be researchers of their own practice, not merely consumers of prescriptive methods. This approach is consistent with the reflective practitioner model discussed earlier in this chapter, and it produces graduates who are pedagogically sophisticated, intellectually independent, and capable of adapting to new educational challenges without requiring external direction.

The professional autonomy principle is perhaps the most difficult to transfer. Finnish teachers exercise genuine curriculum autonomy, designing their own lessons and units within the broad framework of national curriculum guidelines without the prescriptive direction that characterizes curriculum implementation in Bangladesh. This autonomy is both a cause and an effect of the high professional quality of Finnish teachers: they are trusted with autonomy because they are well-prepared to exercise it responsibly, and their professional development is driven partly by the responsibility of autonomy.

8.2 The Singapore Model: Teacher Selection, Structured Development, and Performance Management

Singapore's approach to teacher quality, which has attracted considerable international attention since Singapore's remarkable PISA results in the 2000s, is organized around a different set of principles from the Finnish model, though both achieve similar outcomes in terms of teaching quality. The Singaporean approach is more managed and more structured than the Finnish approach: it involves centralized teacher selection from the top third of the graduate cohort, a structured career ladder with differentiated pathways, performance-linked compensation, and systematic professional development tied to career progression.

The National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore is responsible for all pre-service and in-service teacher education, providing a single institutional framework that ensures consistency of preparation across the teaching workforce. The NIE's programs are comprehensive, practically grounded, and closely integrated with the school system: student teachers have extended field experience in schools, school mentors are trained to support student teacher development, and the NIE faculty are closely connected with school practice. The resulting alignment between pre-service preparation and in-service practice is significantly stronger than in Bangladesh's more fragmented system.

Singapore's structured career ladder, which distinguishes between the teaching track (for those who remain in classroom teaching), the leadership track (for those who move into school management), and the specialist track (for those who develop deep expertise in specific areas of curriculum or pedagogy), provides clear career development pathways that allow teachers to grow professionally without leaving the classroom. This structure is relevant to Bangladesh, where the current career structure offers limited pathways for professional advancement without

leaving classroom teaching for administrative positions, creating a counterproductive dynamic in which the best teachers become school administrators rather than master teachers.

The performance management system in Singapore, which involves annual goal-setting, observation and feedback from supervisors, and performance-linked increments, provides accountability mechanisms that Bangladesh's current system largely lacks. But the effectiveness of Singapore's performance management system depends on the quality of the supervisors who conduct the observations and provide the feedback, a quality that is itself the product of the training and support that school leaders receive in Singapore. The transplantation of a performance management system without the leadership quality necessary to implement it fairly and developmentally would produce surveillance and demoralization rather than accountability and improvement.

8.3 The Brazilian Lesson: Investing in Teacher Education at Scale

Brazil's experience with large-scale reform of teacher education, particularly through the National Education Plan's requirements for all teachers to hold university-level qualifications and the PARFOR program for in-service teacher qualification, provides a relevant example of the challenges and possibilities of reform at a scale comparable to Bangladesh's.

Brazil entered the 2000s with a large proportion of its primary teachers, particularly in the Northeast, without university-level qualifications. The PARFOR (Special Teacher Training Plan for the Basic Education Network), launched in 2009, aimed to provide university-level qualifications to teachers already in service through specially designed part-time programs delivered in partnership with federal universities. By 2019, PARFOR had enrolled hundreds of thousands of in-service teachers in undergraduate qualification programs, significantly improving the formal qualification levels of the teaching workforce.

The Brazilian experience provides both encouragement and caution for Bangladesh's reform aspirations. The encouragement: large-scale teacher qualification programs are feasible and can significantly improve the formal qualification profile of the workforce within a decade. The caution: qualification alone is insufficient; teachers who complete qualification programs through intensive part-time study while teaching full-time do not necessarily develop the reflective, pedagogically sophisticated practice that genuine teacher quality requires. The improvement in credentials outpaced the improvement in practice, and the relationship between enhanced formal qualifications and improved student learning outcomes was weaker than reformers had hoped.

8.4 India's Teacher Education Reform: Lessons from the National Council for Teacher Education

India's experience with teacher education reform, mediated through the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) and most recently through the Teacher Education policies embedded in the National Education Policy of 2020, is perhaps the most directly relevant international comparison for Bangladesh given the shared historical, cultural, and institutional legacies of the subcontinent.

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India's NEP 2020 makes the reform of teacher education a central priority, including the proposed transition to a four-year integrated undergraduate teacher education program (replacing the current one-year B.Ed. post-graduation model), the requirement for school internship throughout the program rather than only in a final practice teaching period, and the development of more rigorous teacher certification through the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET). These proposals, if implemented, would represent the most significant reform of Indian teacher education since independence and would produce graduates with both deeper subject-matter knowledge, developed through four years of integrated study, and more sustained pedagogical development, developed through extended school experience throughout the program.

The relevance of India's NEP 2020 teacher education reform for Bangladesh is significant. Both systems share the one-year post-graduation B.Ed. as the primary secondary teacher qualification. Both systems struggle with the disconnect between pedagogical theory in teacher education and pedagogical practice in schools. Both systems face the challenge of scale: India's more than nine million teachers, and Bangladesh's several hundred thousand, both represent workforces too large to transform through conventional intensive training approaches without systematic structural reform. The Indian example suggests that the move to longer, more integrated, more practically grounded teacher education programs is the structural reform most likely to produce genuine improvement in pre-service teacher preparation.

Chapter Nine: Teacher Governance, Accountability, and Professional Standards

9.1 The Framework of Teacher Accountability in Bangladesh

The governance of the teaching profession in Bangladesh is distributed across multiple institutional actors with overlapping and sometimes conflicting responsibilities. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the Ministry of Education are the primary policy actors for primary and secondary teaching respectively. The Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) are the primary administrative actors. The district and Upazila education offices are the primary field-level administrative actors. The PTI instructors and school inspectors are the primary field-level quality assurance actors. And the school principals are the primary school-level accountability actors.

This distributed governance structure has significant implications for accountability. The sheer number of actors involved in the governance of the teaching profession means that accountability is diffuse, with no single actor bearing clear and exclusive responsibility for the quality of teaching in any particular school or classroom. The principal bears nominal responsibility for teacher performance in the school, but her formal powers over teacher performance, including the power to take disciplinary action against persistent underperformers, are limited by the bureaucratic protections that government employment provides for teachers.

The school inspection system, through which Upazila Education Officers and assistant inspectors visit schools to monitor and evaluate their functioning, is the primary external accountability mechanism for school and teacher performance. The effectiveness of this system is limited by

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the very high ratio of schools to inspectors, which means that any individual school receives a formal inspection visit only rarely. When inspection visits do occur, they are often signaled in advance, allowing schools and teachers to prepare a performance that is not representative of their normal practice. And the criteria for inspection, which are primarily focused on administrative compliance (attendance registers, student enrollment records, physical infrastructure) rather than on pedagogical quality and student learning, provide a very limited picture of the educational quality the system is providing.

9.2 Teacher Professional Standards: The Development of a Competency Framework

The development of a formal framework of teacher professional standards, describing what effective teachers should know, believe, and be able to do, is a prerequisite for the development of coherent and evidence-based approaches to teacher selection, preparation, induction, professional development, and performance management. Without a shared and publicly articulated framework of professional standards, it is impossible to design teacher education programs that consistently develop the knowledge and skills that teaching requires, or to develop the assessment instruments and observation tools that would allow teacher performance to be evaluated in ways that are valid, reliable, and fair.

Several countries have developed influential teacher professional standards frameworks that provide models for Bangladesh. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, organized around seven standards in three domains (professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement) and four career stages (graduate, proficient, highly accomplished, and lead teacher), provides a comprehensive and practically grounded framework that has been used to reform teacher education, teacher registration, and performance management in Australia's state school systems. The Singapore Teacher Competency Framework, which describes the competencies expected of Singapore teachers across a range of domains, provides a similarly comprehensive model developed in a system with strong analogies to Bangladesh in terms of its relatively centralized and highly performance-conscious educational culture.

The ADB's School Education Reform Sector Development Program for Bangladesh intends to incorporate incentives into the teacher salary structure for better performance and continuous professional development, and introduce a fast-track teacher qualification program in universities to bring mid-career professionals into teaching. Wikipedia This program represents an important step toward the development of a more structured and performance-oriented approach to teacher professional development in Bangladesh, including the development of teacher professional standards that can anchor the design of training programs and performance assessment instruments.

The development of teacher professional standards for Bangladesh must be a genuinely consultative process that engages classroom teachers in the articulation of the standards, not merely a top-down design exercise conducted by administrators and academic experts. Teachers are the primary repositories of practical knowledge about what effective teaching requires in Bangladesh's specific institutional and cultural conditions, and their involvement in the development of professional standards is both instrumentally valuable (it produces standards that

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better reflect the realities of practice) and intrinsically important (it treats teachers as professional co-creators of professional norms rather than as recipients of externally prescribed standards).

9.3 Teacher Registration, Licensing, and the Regulation of Entry to the Profession

The regulation of entry to the teaching profession through licensing or registration is a governance mechanism that has been developed in various forms in many educational systems. Teacher registration systems, which require teachers to hold specific qualifications and to demonstrate fitness to practice as conditions of authorization to teach, provide a quality assurance function at the point of entry to the profession that is potentially valuable in Bangladesh's context of variable pre-service preparation quality.

Bangladesh does not currently have a comprehensive teacher registration system analogous to those of Australia, England, or South Korea. The primary mechanism for regulating entry to government teaching is the qualification requirement (C-in-Ed for primary, B.Ed. for secondary) combined with the competitive appointment process that allocates government teaching positions. This system provides a minimum qualification filter but does not assess actual pedagogical competence, which is what a registration system would ideally do.

The Bangladesh Teacher Education and Research Council, which has been proposed in various educational reform discussions as a body that could develop and administer teacher professional standards and registration, does not yet exist as an operational institution. The development of such a council, with authority to develop professional standards, quality-assure teacher education programs, administer licensing examinations, register qualified teachers, and investigate complaints of professional misconduct, would represent a significant institutional development that could substantially improve the quality assurance of the teaching profession.

The jurisprudential dimension of teacher registration is important. A registration system that creates a legal requirement for teacher licensing as a condition of practice, backed by clear and independently adjudicated procedures for registration, suspension, and deregistration, would create a more robust legal framework for teacher quality assurance than the current administrative arrangements provide. It would also create clearer legal rights for teachers, including the right to a fair process before deregistration, that the current system does not systematically provide.

9.4 Teacher Performance Management: The Challenge of Measuring What Matters

The development of fair, valid, and practically implementable systems for evaluating teacher performance is among the most technically challenging problems in educational policy. The challenge has three dimensions. First, the measurement problem: what indicators of teacher performance are sufficiently reliable and valid to serve as the basis for high-stakes decisions about pay, promotion, and continued employment? Second, the use problem: how should performance information be used, and how can the use of performance data for accountability purposes be reconciled with its use for developmental purposes? Third, the justice problem: how can performance evaluation systems be made fair across the diverse contexts in which teachers work, avoiding the systematic bias against teachers working in the most disadvantaged schools?

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The dominant approach to teacher performance measurement in high-income countries over the past two decades has been value-added measurement (VAM): statistical models that attempt to isolate the contribution of the individual teacher to student learning gains by controlling for student background characteristics. VAM systems have been implemented in several US states, in England through the Department for Education's "progress measures," and in other countries as components of teacher evaluation and accountability systems. The appeal of VAM is its apparent objectivity: it produces a number that represents the teacher's contribution to student learning, and it does so through a statistical process that appears to control for the factors outside the teacher's control.

The limitations and criticisms of VAM are extensive and have been thoroughly documented by statisticians, psychometricians, and educational researchers. The statistical estimates produced by VAM models are highly unstable, varying substantially from year to year for the same teacher in ways that cannot be explained by genuine changes in teaching quality. They are sensitive to the specific model specifications and assumptions used, producing different results for the same teacher depending on the specific VAM model applied. They are subject to systematic biases that disadvantage teachers in high-poverty schools. And they provide no diagnostic information about what the teacher is doing well or poorly that could guide professional development.

For Bangladesh, the complex statistical infrastructure of VAM systems is in any case premature: before sophisticated value-added measurement systems are useful, there must be valid and reliable measures of student learning that are administered consistently across the system, teacher-level data infrastructure that links teachers to students, and the statistical capacity to develop, implement, and interpret complex VAM models. None of these preconditions is currently robustly in place. More pragmatically useful for Bangladesh in the near term are structured observation protocols, professional portfolio approaches, and multiple-measure systems that combine lesson observation, student learning evidence, and self-assessment in ways that are valid, manageable, and supportive of professional development rather than simply punitive.

Chapter Ten: The Teacher in the Digital Age: New Demands, New Opportunities, New Challenges

10.1 The Transformation of the Teacher's Role in the Digital Learning Ecology

The rapid development of digital educational technologies, examined in Part Four of this commentary, has profound implications for the role of the teacher that go beyond the technical challenge of using new tools. The availability of high-quality digital content, interactive learning applications, and AI tutoring systems is fundamentally altering the teacher's position in the learning process. If students can access accurate, well-explained content on any topic through a smartphone application, and if AI tutoring systems can provide patient, personalized, immediate feedback on student work, the teacher's role as a primary information source is significantly reduced. What remains, and what becomes more rather than less important, is the teacher's role

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as a learning guide, a motivational coach, a social relationship builder, a cultural interpreter, and a moral exemplar.

This transformation of the teacher's role from information transmitter to learning facilitator is not new: progressive educational philosophy has been arguing for precisely this transformation for a century. What is new is that the technological displacement of the information-transmission function is now happening whether or not educational systems and teachers are philosophically prepared for it, creating an urgency for adaptation that previous calls for pedagogical transformation did not generate.

For Bangladesh's teachers, this technological transformation presents both a significant opportunity and a genuine threat. The opportunity is that digital tools can provide the content delivery that currently occupies much of teachers' classroom time, freeing them to focus on the higher-order aspects of pedagogy, including dialogue, mentoring, collaborative learning facilitation, and the development of higher-order thinking, that cannot be replicated by technology. The threat is that teachers who cannot adapt to a facilitative role, who lack the pedagogical repertoire and professional confidence to guide student-centered learning in a digitally enriched environment, will be progressively displaced by technology in the worst sense: their classrooms will feature students on devices with teachers as supervisors rather than educators.

10.2 Digital Literacy as Teacher Competence

The development of digital literacy as a professional competence for Bangladesh's teachers is both more urgent and more complex than the provision of digital tools. The mere possession of a smartphone or access to an internet-connected computer does not make a teacher digitally literate in the professional sense. Digital teacher literacy includes the ability to evaluate the educational quality of digital resources, to integrate digital tools into pedagogical sequences in ways that genuinely enhance learning rather than simply digitizing existing practice, to manage the challenges of a digitally enabled classroom including student distraction, academic dishonesty, and unequal access, and to develop students' own digital literacies including critical media literacy and safe and ethical online behavior.

The development of these digital teacher competencies requires professional development that is itself digitally sophisticated. A teacher development program that teaches about digital pedagogy through a lecture and PowerPoint presentation does not prepare teachers to use digital tools effectively in their classrooms; it merely introduces them to the vocabulary. Effective digital teacher development involves the practical use of digital tools in the development experience itself, including the use of collaborative digital platforms for professional learning communities, the evaluation and critique of digital educational resources, and the design and micro-teaching of digitally-enhanced lesson sequences.

Piloting in-service teachers' professional development and networking has been initiated in Bangladesh through virtual learning environment (VLE), web 2.0, e-learning, and mobile learning in addition to traditional modes. Although they have been found to be contributing significantly in improving the quality of teachers, lack of guidance on curricular development,

lack of teacher collaboration, and peer support are identified as a hindrance in teachers' professional development. Daily Observer

The recognition of peer support and collaboration as essential components of effective digital teacher development is consistent with the community of practice theory discussed earlier. Digital tools can both support and constitute professional learning communities: online platforms for teacher collaboration, shared lesson planning, and peer observation can extend the reach of professional learning communities beyond the physical boundaries of individual schools, connecting teachers across districts and regions in shared professional inquiry.

10.3 AI Tutors, Adaptive Learning, and the Minimum Viable Teacher

The emergence of sophisticated AI tutoring systems, including those based on large language models capable of engaging in extended, responsive dialogue about virtually any educational topic, raises the provocative question of what is the "minimum viable teacher" in a world where AI can provide high-quality content instruction and immediate formative feedback. This question, which sounds dystopian to teachers who understandably fear for the future of their profession, can be reframed more productively as: what is it that human teachers can do that AI systems cannot, and how should the teaching profession develop to concentrate on and deepen these distinctively human capabilities?

The honest answer is that current AI tutoring systems can do many things previously reserved for skilled human teachers: explain concepts in multiple ways, identify student misconceptions, provide patient practice and immediate feedback, adapt the difficulty level of tasks to student performance, and maintain an engaging interactive style that keeps students motivated. What they cannot do is the fundamentally relational, embodied, and contextually embedded work of human education: building the long-term trust relationships that enable vulnerable students to take intellectual risks, modeling the intellectual and moral virtues that students are invited to develop, reading the emotional and social dynamics of the classroom with the nuanced perception that human social intelligence provides, and exercising the moral judgment that the complex, particular, irreducibly human situations of classroom life require.

These distinctively human teaching capabilities are precisely the ones that have been most undervalued and least developed in Bangladesh's teacher education system, which has focused primarily on content knowledge and basic pedagogical methods rather than on the relational, moral, and clinical dimensions of teaching practice. The AI revolution, paradoxically, may create the strongest ever argument for investing in the development of these human teaching capabilities, by displacing the technical dimensions of teaching that current teacher education programs focus on and clearing space for the development of the deeper human capacities that education in the fullest sense requires.

10.4 Teacher Unions, Collective Action, and Professional Advocacy in the Digital Age

The digital transformation of communication has created new possibilities for teacher collective action and professional advocacy that are beginning to be realized in Bangladesh's context, though not yet in ways that have substantially altered the political economy of the teaching

profession. Social media platforms, WhatsApp groups, and online professional communities have enabled teachers to communicate across geographical boundaries in ways that were previously impossible, creating the potential for more organic, less politically captured forms of professional solidarity than the formal teacher union structure has typically provided.

The emergence of informal teacher networks organized around specific pedagogical interests or professional challenges, connecting teachers who share a commitment to particular educational approaches across district and divisional boundaries, represents a promising development in the organizational culture of Bangladesh's teaching profession. These networks, operating largely outside the formal structures of the teacher union system, provide spaces for the kind of genuine professional discourse that the formal professional organizations, constrained by their political alignments and bureaucratic structures, have not consistently supported.

The development of these informal networks into sustainable professional learning communities that can serve as genuine vehicles for professional advocacy and quality improvement is an important but uncertain process. It requires teachers with the professional confidence and digital literacy to initiate and sustain online professional discourse, a digital infrastructure that reaches teachers in remote areas, and an institutional environment that values and protects professional voice rather than suppressing it as politically inconvenient.

Chapter Eleven: Gender, Teaching, and the Feminization of the Profession

11.1 The Feminization of Primary Teaching: Dynamics, Causes, and Consequences

The feminization of primary teaching in Bangladesh, the progressive increase in the proportion of women in the primary teaching workforce, is one of the most significant demographic transformations in the teaching profession over the past three decades. Driven by a combination of government policy, changing social norms around women's employment, and the specific labor market dynamics of the primary teaching sector, the feminization of primary teaching has reached the point where women constitute a majority of primary school teachers in many districts and are approaching parity nationally.

The government's policy of mandating minimum proportions of female teachers in co-educational primary schools, a policy motivated partly by educational arguments about the positive effects of female teacher role models for girls' enrollment and retention and partly by gender equity objectives in public employment, has been an important driver of the feminization trend. The expansion of female secondary and higher education since the 1990s, which has produced a large cohort of educated women seeking professional employment, has provided the supply side of the feminization process.

The consequences of the feminization of primary teaching are complex and contested. On the positive side, the presence of female teachers has been consistently found to improve girls' enrollment and attendance in primary schools, particularly in more conservative communities where families are reluctant to send their daughters to schools staffed entirely by male teachers.

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Female teachers also provide important role models for girls at a critical developmental stage, signaling through their professional presence that women can occupy positions of educational authority and knowledge.

On the more cautionary side, the feminization of primary teaching is occurring in a context in which primary teaching is a relatively low-status, low-paid occupation, and the association of the occupation with women reflects and reinforces the pattern by which female labor is systematically less valued than male labor in a patriarchal economic system. As teaching at the primary level becomes increasingly associated with women's work, it risks losing what residual prestige it retains as a profession worthy of the best educated graduates, male or female.

11.2 Gender Discrimination in Teacher Career Progression

The career progression of female teachers within Bangladesh's educational system is significantly constrained by gender discrimination operating through both formal and informal mechanisms. The formal career structure does not formally discriminate against women in promotion to senior teaching or administrative positions. But in practice, women are significantly underrepresented in school principal positions, in educational administration above the school level, in teacher training institutions, and in the policy-making institutions of the educational bureaucracy.

The informal mechanisms of gender discrimination in teacher career progression include the cultural expectations that limit women's geographical mobility (making them less available for postings in areas distant from their families), the expectations of domestic and childcare responsibility that reduce the time available for the professional activities, including further study and participation in professional networks, that support career advancement, the gender biases of male supervisors and administrators who evaluate promotion candidates, and the social norms that define certain educational leadership roles as inherently male.

These informal mechanisms of discrimination are more difficult to address than formal discrimination because they operate through the diffuse social force of cultural expectations rather than through specific legal or administrative provisions. Gender-sensitive approaches to teacher professional development, which address the specific barriers that women face in advancing their professional learning and career development, are needed alongside the formal anti-discrimination provisions that the legal framework provides.

11.3 Male Teacher Recruitment: A Countertrend and Its Implications

The feminization of the primary teaching workforce has generated concern in some educational policy circles about the declining presence of male teachers, particularly as role models for boys. Research on the effects of teacher gender on student outcomes, while not entirely consistent, suggests that matching the gender of the teacher to the gender of the student can have positive effects on some outcomes, particularly for boys who may benefit from male teacher role models in primary school. Bangladesh's educational system does not currently have a systematic policy for ensuring an adequate representation of male teachers in primary schools, though the rapid feminization of the workforce has created this as an emerging policy concern.

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The recruitment of men into primary teaching requires addressing the core deterrent: the social status and material conditions of primary teaching are not attractive to men with higher-earning alternatives. The cultural association of early childhood and primary education with women's nurturing work is also a deterrent in a society where men who choose to work in feminized occupations may face social stigma. Addressing the male recruitment challenge therefore requires both improving the material conditions of primary teaching and changing the cultural framing of the primary teacher's role from a gendered nurturing function to a skilled professional practice that is equally appropriate for men and women.

11.4 Women's Leadership in Education: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

The development of women's leadership in Bangladesh's educational institutions and educational policy system is an important equity objective in its own right and also, from a consequentialist perspective, a strategy for improving educational quality. The research on educational leadership consistently finds that the diversity of leadership teams, including gender diversity, is associated with better decision-making quality and more inclusive organizational cultures. Women in educational leadership positions bring perspectives, priorities, and leadership styles that are on average somewhat different from those of male leaders, and the systematic underrepresentation of women in educational leadership means that these perspectives are inadequately represented in the decisions that shape the educational system.

The development of women's leadership in Bangladesh's educational system requires attention to the pipeline of women in intermediate leadership positions (head teachers, deputy principals, Upazila education officers) from which more senior leaders are drawn, as well as to the specific leadership development programs that prepare women for senior roles. It also requires attention to the organizational cultures of educational institutions and the educational bureaucracy, cultures that currently reflect the patriarchal assumptions of the broader society and that need to evolve toward greater inclusiveness and respect for diverse leadership styles.

Chapter Twelve: Toward a New Professional Framework for Bangladesh's Teachers

12.1 The Vision: Teaching as the Most Important Profession

The analysis of this Part has documented, in considerable detail, the structural conditions that prevent Bangladesh's teaching profession from achieving the quality that the country's educational aspirations require. Low salaries, inadequate pre-service preparation, insufficient in-service professional development, weak accountability, political patronage in deployment, teacher absenteeism, and the demoralization of practitioners in difficult conditions, all conspire to maintain a profession in the low-quality equilibrium described in the Prologue.

Breaking out of this equilibrium requires a fundamental reorientation of educational policy that places the quality of the teaching profession at the center of everything. This reorientation is not simply a technical matter of reforming specific components of the teacher development system. It is a political and cultural transformation that requires political leadership willing to make

sustained investment in the teaching profession a non-negotiable policy priority, social commitment to honoring and rewarding the work of teachers at a level commensurate with its social importance, and institutional willingness to hold teachers accountable for professional quality while simultaneously providing the conditions that make quality possible.

The vision is straightforward, even if the implementation is difficult: Bangladesh needs a teaching profession that is among the most respected and best compensated in the country, that attracts the country's best graduates through competitive selection processes, that prepares them rigorously through extended and practically grounded teacher education programs, that develops them continuously through sustained school-based professional learning, that holds them accountable fairly and developmentally for their professional performance, that deploys them equitably across geographical areas, and that protects their professional autonomy in ways that enable them to exercise genuine pedagogical judgment in the service of their students' development.

This vision is not utopian. It has been achieved, in various forms and through various pathways, by Finland, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and increasingly by countries like Vietnam, Bhutan, and certain Indian states. The conditions that enabled these countries to achieve this vision include sustained political commitment across multiple government administrations, adequate financial investment, institutional development of teacher education capacity, and the cultural valorization of teaching as a contribution to national development. Bangladesh possesses the political institutions, the economic resources, and the cultural traditions that could support this transformation. What it has not yet mobilized is the political will and the sustained commitment across political transitions to make it happen.

12.2 The Reform Architecture: A Phased Approach to Systemic Transformation

The transformation of Bangladesh's teaching profession from its current state to the vision articulated above cannot happen quickly or through any single intervention. It requires a long-term, phased reform program that builds the foundations for each subsequent phase before attempting to implement it, and that maintains coherence and direction across the political transitions that will inevitably occur during a reform program of the necessary duration.

The first phase of reform should focus on establishing the conditions for quality: improving the material conditions of the profession to make it more attractive to well-qualified candidates, developing the institutional infrastructure for quality teacher education, and establishing the professional standards framework that will guide all subsequent phases of reform. A National Teacher Certification Program will help ensure that teachers remain at the forefront of global teaching standards, providing high-quality education to students across all streams. The Daily Star

The second phase should focus on quality development: implementing the more rigorous, longer-duration pre-service teacher education programs, developing the school-based professional development infrastructure, and building the collaborative professional learning communities at the school and cluster level that will sustain professional growth.

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The third phase should focus on quality accountability: developing the fair and developmentally oriented performance management systems that hold teachers accountable for professional quality, while providing the support and resources that accountability without support merely punishes.

Throughout all phases, the reform should be guided by the evidence of what is working and what is not, through systematic monitoring and evaluation that is designed to generate learning rather than merely compliance reporting. The capacity for evidence-based adaptive management of the reform, adjusting course on the basis of what is learned, is as important as the quality of the initial reform design.

12.3 The Legal and Constitutional Framework for Teacher Reform

The legal and constitutional dimensions of teacher reform in Bangladesh include both the rights of teachers and the obligations that the state's constitutional commitment to quality education imposes on the management of the teaching workforce.

The rights dimension includes the labor rights of teachers as government employees, the professional rights of teachers to exercise pedagogical judgment within their area of professional competence, and the rights of teachers to fair treatment in appointment, deployment, promotion, and disciplinary proceedings. These rights are partially protected under existing labor law and government service regulations, but the specific professional rights of teachers, as distinct from their general employee rights, are inadequately developed in Bangladesh's legal framework.

The obligations dimension includes the state's obligation under Article 17 of the Constitution to provide quality education, which implies an obligation to ensure that the teachers through whom education is provided are adequately prepared, supported, and accountable. The constitutional obligation to provide quality education cannot be discharged by a state that systematically fails to invest in the quality of the teaching workforce, and the development of a legal accountability framework that connects the state's educational investment decisions to its constitutional obligations is an important jurisprudential development.

The development of teacher professional legislation, analogous to the medical councils acts and bar council acts that govern the medical and legal professions, would provide a more robust legal framework for the governance of the teaching profession than the current patchwork of employment regulations and administrative rules. Such legislation could establish a teacher registration authority, define the professional standards required for registration, provide for the maintenance of a register of qualified teachers, and create procedures for the investigation and adjudication of professional misconduct complaints.

12.4 The Political Sociology of Teacher Reform: Why It Is Difficult and How to Make It Possible

The political sociology of teacher reform in Bangladesh, which is the final analytical dimension of this Part, explains both why comprehensive reform of the teaching profession has not been

achieved despite decades of policy aspiration and why achieving it in the future will require navigating specific structural political challenges.

The primary structural obstacle to comprehensive teacher reform is the entanglement of the teaching profession with the patronage politics of the two-party political system. Teaching positions, particularly in rural government schools, are valuable patronage resources whose allocation to political supporters is a significant tool of political mobilization. Any reform that substitutes merit-based selection for patronage-based allocation of teaching positions directly threatens one of the most important patronage resources available to political parties, and it will therefore be resisted by powerful political interests regardless of its educational merits.

The teacher unions, which might in other political contexts be advocates for professional reform, are in Bangladesh largely aligned with the major political parties and therefore more likely to protect the patronage system that provides their members with employment security than to advocate for merit-based reforms that might threaten that security. The development of politically independent teacher professionalism, organized around professional values and quality standards rather than political alignment, is therefore a prerequisite for the effective reform advocacy that comprehensive teacher reform requires.

International development organizations, particularly the World Bank, the ADB, and bilateral donors, have an important role to play in supporting teacher reform, both through financial support for the investments in teacher education and professional development that reform requires, and through the analytical and advocacy work that creates political space for reform. The Global Partnership for Education's Partnership Compact with Bangladesh aligns partners and resources with the national priority reform aimed at improving teacher professionalization for effective teaching towards enhanced learning outcomes. ERIC This alignment of international support with a national priority reform creates the kind of political and financial framework that can sustain reform through political transitions, if the reform is genuinely institutionalized rather than depending entirely on the political support of a single government.

The most fundamental requirement for teacher reform, however, is a shift in political culture regarding education: a shift from the instrumentalization of education as a patronage resource and a political credential to a genuine social commitment to education as the foundation of national development and individual flourishing. This shift is not impossible. Bangladesh's society has demonstrated, in the rapid expansion of enrollment, in the remarkable achievements of organizations like BRAC, and in the extraordinary educational aspiration of families across all social classes, that the commitment to education as a social value is present and powerful. What has been lacking is the translation of this social commitment into the sustained political will to invest adequately in the quality of the teachers who are the proximate agents of educational fulfillment or failure. The development of that political will is ultimately a democratic challenge: citizens who understand the connection between teacher quality and their children's educational futures, who demand accountability for teacher quality from their political representatives, and who are willing to accept the financial and institutional costs of genuine teacher reform, are the ultimate constituency that makes teacher reform politically possible.

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The children of Bangladesh have waited long enough. They deserve teachers who are well-selected, well-prepared, well-supported, well-compensated, and genuinely accountable for the quality of the education they provide. The path to those teachers begins with the social and political decision to make the quality of teaching the central priority of educational policy, and to pursue that priority with the sustained commitment that the magnitude of the challenge, and the importance of what is at stake, genuinely requires.

Conclusion to Part Five: The Teacher as the System's Most Critical Resource

The analysis of this Part has traced the teacher from the philosophical heights of what teaching is and should be, through the institutional history of the profession in Bangladesh, the pre-service and in-service systems that form and develop teachers, the political economy that shapes who enters the profession and under what conditions they practice, the psychological dynamics of motivation and identity, the specific worlds of Madrasa teaching and female pedagogy, the governance and accountability frameworks that hold teachers responsible, the digital transformation of the profession's demands, and the gender dynamics that shape its composition and culture.

The central finding that emerges from this analysis is simultaneously simple and demanding: the quality of education in Bangladesh's schools is primarily determined by the quality of the teachers in them, and the quality of those teachers is primarily determined by the attractiveness, preparation, development, support, and accountability structures of the profession. These structures are currently inadequate in ways that are well-documented and not particularly disputed. The dispute is not about diagnosis but about the political will and the sustained commitment that adequate treatment requires.

The path from the current low-quality equilibrium to the high-quality professional model that Bangladesh's children deserve is long, difficult, and politically contested. But it is not uncharted. The experience of countries that have made the journey, from post-war South Korea to post-colonial Singapore to twenty-first-century Vietnam, provides both the evidence that the journey is possible and guidance on the choices that make it more or less likely to succeed. The specific features of Bangladesh's institutional, cultural, and political context will shape how the journey must be made, but the destination is clear: a teaching profession that is genuinely professional, that is genuinely valued, and that is genuinely capable of providing every child in Bangladesh with the education that her development, her dignity, and her citizenship in a democratic society requires.

Part Six of this commentary will turn from the teacher to the institution in which teaching occurs, examining the structure, governance, and culture of Bangladesh's higher education system, analyzing the crisis of quality and accountability in the public universities, the rapid expansion and uneven quality of private higher education, the relationship between higher education and national development, and the reform agenda that Bangladesh's higher education needs and has not yet consistently received.

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Supplementary Analytical Commentary: The Teachers of the Margins

No account of teaching in Bangladesh is complete without attention to the teachers who work at the furthest margins of the formal system, in the non-formal schools of BRAC, the learning centers of the Rohingya camps, the schools of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the informal pedagogical spaces of the street children's education programs. These teachers, many of them without formal qualifications, working for minimal compensation in the most difficult educational environments in the country, represent a different face of the teaching vocation from the government-employed teacher described in the main body of this Part, and their experience illuminates dimensions of pedagogical commitment and creative adaptation that are often invisible in discussions focused on the formal system.

The BRAC para-teachers, selected from the communities they serve and trained in BRAC's distinctive approach to non-formal primary education, are among the most documented and most celebrated examples of community-based teaching in the world. BRAC's selection criteria for para-teachers, which emphasize community embeddedness, commitment to children's education, and personal qualities of reliability and care rather than formal qualifications, reflect a different theory of what makes a good teacher from the qualification-based theory that governs the formal system. The evidence consistently finds that BRAC's para-teachers achieve learning outcomes, in literacy and numeracy, that match or exceed those achieved by better-qualified teachers in the government system, suggesting that community embeddedness, pedagogical support through BRAC's training and supervision system, and genuine vocational commitment can compensate for the lack of formal qualifications.

The implications of the para-teacher model for the reform of the formal teaching profession are complex and contested. One implication is that formal qualifications, as currently defined and assessed in Bangladesh's teacher education system, are not reliable proxies for teaching quality, and that the reform of qualification requirements should be accompanied by the reform of the qualifications themselves to ensure that they genuinely certify pedagogical competence. Another implication is that community embeddedness and genuine vocational commitment are pedagogically important qualities that the formal system's credential-based and patronage-influenced appointment processes do not systematically select for. A third implication is that the close support and supervision system that BRAC provides to its para-teachers, which is the mechanism through which the gap between qualification and quality is bridged, is an organizational investment in teacher development that the formal system has not replicated, but could.

The teachers of the Rohingya refugee camps, working in overcrowded learning centers under conditions of extreme material deprivation and collective trauma, represent a different but equally instructive case of teaching at the margins. Many of these teachers are themselves refugees, trained in Myanmar's or Bangladesh's educational systems to varying degrees, providing instruction in conditions that would challenge the most professionally prepared and personally resilient educator. Their persistence in teaching, often for minimal compensation and under the psychological burden of their own displacement and loss, represents a form of

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pedagogical courage and vocational commitment that the more comfortable educational settings of urban professional life rarely demand or reveal.

The pedagogical innovations that emerge in these marginal educational contexts, including BRAC's play-based, community-relevant, trauma-sensitive approaches to primary education, the creative use of storytelling and cultural arts as pedagogical tools in non-formal education, and the development of peer teaching models that maximize the coverage achievable with limited teacher resources, deserve more systematic documentation, analysis, and integration into the mainstream professional discourse of teaching in Bangladesh. The margins of the educational system are not merely places where the system's failures are most visible; they are also places where some of the system's most significant pedagogical innovations occur, driven by the necessity that is the mother of educational invention.

Part Six will examine Bangladesh's higher education system in comparable analytical depth, tracing the historical development of the public university sector, the recent explosion of private higher education, the quality crisis in both sectors, the political dynamics of university governance, the relationship between higher education and economic development, and the reform agenda that Bangladesh's higher education needs and has not yet consistently received.

PART SIX: THE UNIVERSITY AND THE NATION

Higher Education, Knowledge, Power, and the Crisis of Academic Life in Bangladesh

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Prologue to Part Six: The University as a Mirror

There is an old idea about universities that is worth revisiting before we examine the particular condition of higher education in Bangladesh. The idea, articulated most forcefully by the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century and by his contemporaries at the newly founded University of Berlin in 1810, is that the university is not merely a place where knowledge is transmitted. It is a place where knowledge is created. It is an institution dedicated not to the reproduction of what is already known but to the discovery of what is not yet known, and to the formation of human beings who can bear the intellectual, moral, and civic weight of carrying forward the project of civilization.

This Humboldtian ideal has been criticized, romanticized, partially realized, and frequently betrayed in the two centuries since it was articulated. But it remains the most philosophically serious account of what a university is, and what distinguishes it from a vocational training college, a credential factory, or a political patronage mechanism. In the Humboldtian conception, the university possesses what might be called a double commitment: a commitment to Wissenschaft, to rigorous, disciplined, self-critical inquiry into the nature of the world, and a commitment to Bildung, to the cultivation of the whole human person through sustained engagement with knowledge, ideas, and the community of learning.

The reason this ideal matters for a study of higher education in Bangladesh is not that it should be uncritically applied as a universal standard against which the Bangladeshi university system should be measured and found deficient. Any such application would be naive, ahistorical, and intellectually dishonest. The Humboldtian university was itself a historically specific institution, shaped by the particular conditions of German intellectual culture, Prussian state formation, and the social position of the academic class in early nineteenth-century Europe. Its transplantation to other contexts, including the British colonial context from which Bangladesh's university system directly descends, has always been partial, contested, and transforming.

The reason the Humboldtian ideal matters is that it poses the most fundamental question about higher education, the question that every society must ask and answer for itself: What is the university for? Not what should universities teach, or how they should be funded, or what their relationship to the economy should be. But what is the fundamental social and intellectual purpose that justifies the enormous investment of resources, the special institutional protections, the degrees of autonomy, and the cultural prestige that universities in every society claim and in many societies receive?

In Bangladesh, this question has not been answered seriously. It has been evaded, instrumentalized, politically colonized, and buried under the administrative pressures of managing a rapidly expanding and chronically underfunded higher education system. The result is that Bangladesh has a large and growing university sector that does not quite know what it is for, that produces hundreds of thousands of graduates every year without a coherent vision of what those graduates should know, what they should be able to do, or what kind of human beings they should have become in the course of their university education.

This Part of the commentary examines Bangladesh's higher education system with the depth, rigor, and philosophical seriousness that the system's importance demands and has rarely received. We begin with philosophy, because without a philosophical framework, higher education policy degenerates into administrative improvisation. We then trace the historical development of higher education in the territory that is now Bangladesh, from the ancient centers of Buddhist learning through the Islamic Madrasa tradition, through the colonial university, through the post-independence public university, and through the remarkable explosion of private universities that has characterized the last three decades. We examine in detail the political economy of higher education, the quality crisis that afflicts both the public and private sectors, the governance frameworks that are supposed to ensure accountability, the relationship between higher education and the labor market that produces the graduate unemployment crisis, and the reform agenda that the system urgently needs and has not yet consistently received.

Throughout this analysis, we maintain the comparative perspective that has characterized this entire commentary, because Bangladesh's experience with higher education, while distinctive in its particular features, is part of a global story about the expansion, transformation, and crisis of mass higher education in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Understanding that global context is essential to understanding both what Bangladesh shares with other countries and what is uniquely, specifically, and stubbornly its own problem.

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Chapter One: The Philosophy of Higher Education and the Question of Bangladesh

1.1 Three Models of What a University Is For

Before we can meaningfully assess what Bangladesh's higher education system is doing and whether it is doing it well, we need to engage with the philosophical question of what a university is supposed to be for. There are, broadly speaking, three major philosophical models of higher education that have competed for dominance in the global conversation about universities over the past two centuries, and all three are present, in varying degrees, in the Bangladeshi context.

The first model is the liberal model, associated historically with the British tradition and articulated most influentially by John Henry Newman in his great work "The Idea of a University," published between 1852 and 1858. For Newman, the purpose of a university education is the cultivation of the intellect, the formation of a mind that is disciplined, expansive, flexible, and capable of engaging with the full range of human knowledge. University education, in this conception, is not primarily vocational. It is not about preparing students for particular professions or equipping them with specific technical skills. It is about forming human beings who can think, who can reason across disciplines, who can bring intellectual order to complexity, and who have been enlarged and humanized by sustained engagement with the greatest achievements of human thought.

The Newmanian ideal has been profoundly influential in shaping the curriculum and culture of the colonial and post-colonial universities of South Asia, including the University of Dhaka. But it has also been profoundly problematic in the South Asian context, for reasons that are both philosophical and political. Philosophically, the Newmanian ideal was developed within the context of a wealthy, relatively leisured society in which many of those who attended university did not need to use it as a path to economic advancement. In a society characterized by mass poverty, high youth unemployment, and desperate economic aspiration, the idea that a university education should be concerned primarily with the cultivation of the intellect rather than the preparation for employment sounds, to many Bangladeshi families who sacrifice enormously to send their children to university, like a cruel luxury.

Politically, the Newmanian ideal was developed within the context of the established disciplines, canons, and intellectual traditions of European civilization. In a postcolonial society, the question of whose knowledge is being transmitted, whose traditions are being cultivated, and whose version of the intellectually formed human being is being produced, is not a question that can be ignored. The wholesale adoption of the Newmanian liberal university in the colonial context produced what Frantz Fanon and later postcolonial theorists identified as a deeply damaging phenomenon: the production of educated elites who were alienated from their own cultural traditions, who measured themselves by standards imported from elsewhere, and who served as cultural intermediaries for the maintenance of colonial and neocolonial power.

The second model is the developmental model, associated with the tradition of German technical universities and, in the post-World War Two period, with the influential work of development economists and the programs of international development organizations. In this model, the

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purpose of higher education is economic and social development. Universities exist to produce the skilled professionals, technicians, researchers, and knowledge workers that a developing economy requires. Higher education is an investment in human capital, a mechanism for the production of the knowledge and skills that will drive economic growth, reduce poverty, and modernize society.

This developmental model has been the dominant framework for thinking about higher education in Bangladesh since independence, and particularly since the 1990s when the influence of the World Bank's human capital theory became especially powerful. The emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education, on vocational and technical higher education, on the alignment of university curricula with labor market demands, and on the measurement of higher education's success in terms of graduate employment rates and economic productivity, all reflect the developmental model.

The developmental model has real virtues. It takes seriously the obligation of higher education to serve the majority of the population and not merely to reproduce an academic elite. It provides a clear and measurable account of what higher education should produce. It connects higher education to the urgent challenges of economic development and poverty reduction. But it also has profound limitations. It tends to reduce education to training, the university to a vocational college, and the student to a unit of human capital. It neglects the dimensions of higher education that are not immediately measurable in economic terms but that are essential to the formation of democratic citizens, critical thinkers, and morally serious human beings. And, crucially, as Bangladesh's experience demonstrates with painful clarity, it produces massive inefficiencies when implemented in a context where the labor market cannot absorb the graduates that the educational system produces.

The third model is what we might call the critical-democratic model, associated with the traditions of critical pedagogy, with the neo-Marxist sociology of education of thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, and with the more recent work on higher education for democratic citizenship of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. In this model, the purpose of higher education is not primarily the formation of individual intellects (the liberal model) or the production of economic utility (the developmental model) but the creation of critically conscious, democratically engaged, socially responsible citizens who are capable of participating in the public life of a democratic society, of understanding and challenging the structures of power and inequality in which they are embedded, and of contributing to the project of building a more just and humane world.

In Bangladesh, the critical-democratic model has been most powerfully articulated not by the universities themselves but by civil society organizations and by the tradition of student political activism that has shaped the country's political history. The student movement of 1952, which established Bangla as an official language; the student movement of 1969, which contributed to the overthrow of Ayub Khan's military dictatorship; the student movement of 1971, which played a central role in the liberation struggle; and the student movement of 2024, which brought down the government of Sheikh Hasina, all represent expressions of the democratic-critical ideal of higher education as a site of citizenship formation and political engagement. The tragedy is that these expressions of democratic energy have occurred largely outside of and often in

opposition to the official institutions of higher education, which have been colonized by political patronage and have rarely provided the intellectual and critical resources that would enable students to engage politically in informed and constructive ways.

1.2 The Postcolonial University and Its Contradictions

The university in Bangladesh, like the university throughout the postcolonial world, carries a specific and particularly acute version of the contradictions that all universities face. It is an institution that was created by the colonial power to serve colonial purposes, that has been maintained and expanded by the postcolonial state to serve developmental and political purposes, and that has been claimed by students and academic communities as a site of national identity, critical thought, and democratic aspiration. These multiple and often incompatible claims on the university produce an institution that is perpetually in tension with itself, that is never quite sure what it is for, and that is therefore vulnerable to colonization by whatever social force is sufficiently powerful to impose its own account of what the university should be on the institution.

The philosopher Ngugi wa Thiong'o, writing from the African postcolonial context, described the postcolonial university as a site of what he called "the politics of the mind," the struggle to determine whose knowledge counts, whose language will be the medium of academic life, whose values will shape the curriculum, and whose conception of the educated person will be produced by the educational process. This description applies with full force to the Bangladeshi university. The politics of the mind in Bangladesh are organized around several axes of conflict: the conflict between Bengali nationalist and Islamic identities in the definition of the educated citizen; the conflict between secular and religious epistemologies in the definition of valid knowledge; the conflict between Western academic standards and indigenous intellectual traditions in the definition of scholarly excellence; and the conflict between the cosmopolitan aspirations of the global knowledge economy and the local cultural commitments of a society that is simultaneously deeply traditional and rapidly modernizing.

These conflicts are not merely abstract philosophical debates. They manifest in the concrete decisions that shape the university: in the language of instruction (Bangladesh's universities teach primarily in Bengali, which creates both a cultural strength and a global disadvantage, because the vast majority of the world's academic literature is published in English); in the content of curricula; in the criteria for faculty appointment and promotion; in the relationship between academic research and political power; and in the culture of campus life that either enables or forecloses the development of critical democratic citizenship.

1.3 The Islamic Philosophical Tradition and Higher Education

Any serious philosophical engagement with higher education in Bangladesh must include a substantive engagement with the Islamic philosophical tradition, which provides the framework within which a very large proportion of Bangladesh's population thinks about the purpose and proper form of knowledge and its transmission. We examined this tradition in the context of the Madrasa system in earlier parts of this commentary, but its relevance to higher education in the general sense is equally significant.

The Islamic intellectual tradition possesses a rich and sophisticated philosophy of higher learning. The concept of the "Dar al-Ulum," the house of knowledge, which was the organizing principle of the great medieval Islamic universities from Al-Azhar in Cairo to the Nizamiyya in Baghdad, embedded a particular vision of what higher learning is for: the integration of religious and rational knowledge in the service of a comprehensive understanding of the divine creation and human responsibility within it. The famous classification of the sciences by al-Ghazali and ibn Khaldun, which organized all branches of knowledge in relation to their distance from or proximity to the divine purpose, represents a coherent and philosophically sophisticated alternative to the secular disciplinary organization of modern Western universities.

The tension between this Islamic philosophical tradition and the secular, Westernized model of higher education that Bangladesh's universities have inherited from the colonial period is one of the most important and least adequately addressed tensions in Bangladeshi higher education. It manifests in the persistent student demand for Islamic studies programs and Quran-based education within the general university system, in the political pressure on universities to conform to Islamic social values, and in the deep ambivalence that many Bangladeshi families feel about sending their daughters to mixed-gender university campuses that operate according to cultural values they find alien and threatening.

A philosophically serious higher education policy for Bangladesh would engage with this tension directly, creating space within the general university system for Islamic scholarship conducted to the highest academic standards, facilitating dialogue between Islamic and Western philosophical traditions in the curriculum, and developing a model of the educated Bangladeshi that is genuinely synthesis rather than merely superficial accommodation. This has not happened, and the absence of this serious philosophical engagement is one of the reasons why the tension remains a source of social and political friction rather than a productive intellectual encounter.

1.4 Sen and Nussbaum: The Capability Approach and Higher Education

The most philosophically sophisticated contemporary framework for thinking about higher education that has direct relevance to the Bangladeshi context is the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum, in particular, has applied the capability approach specifically to higher education in her important work "Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities" (2010) and in her broader philosophical writings on education and human development.

For Sen, the proper measure of development is not GDP or economic growth but the expansion of human capabilities, the real freedoms that people have to live lives they have reason to value. For Nussbaum, the central capabilities relevant to higher education include the capability to use one's senses, imagination, thought, and reason in a truly human way; the capability to experience emotions and forms of human association; the capability to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about one's own life; the capability to live with others, to show concern for others, and to engage in various forms of social interaction; and the capability to play, to laugh, and to engage in recreational and creative activities.

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The capability approach has immediate and productive implications for how we should evaluate higher education in Bangladesh. The dominant evaluation framework, derived from the human capital and developmental models, measures higher education's success primarily in terms of graduate employment rates, income returns to education, and the contribution of higher education to GDP growth. The capability approach suggests that this evaluation framework is radically incomplete, because it measures only the economic dimensions of what higher education produces and ignores the dimensions that are concerned with the formation of the whole human person, with democratic citizenship, and with the expansion of human freedom.

Applying the capability approach to Bangladesh's higher education system produces a very different and in many ways more disturbing picture than the one produced by employment-focused evaluation frameworks. A graduate employment focus reveals a severe mismatch between educational outputs and labor market demands. A capability approach reveals, in addition, a system that systematically fails to develop in its students the capabilities of critical thought, imaginative empathy, civic engagement, and personal autonomy that Sen and Nussbaum identify as the central purposes of higher education. And this failure has consequences not only for the individual graduates who are denied these capabilities but for the democratic polity that depends on citizens who possess them.

Chapter Two: Historical Architecture -- From the Vihara to the Vice-Chancellor

2.1 Ancient Centers of Higher Learning in Bengal

The history of higher education in the territory that is now Bangladesh stretches back more than fifteen centuries, to the era when the great Buddhist monastic universities of the Pala period (eighth to twelfth centuries) made the eastern Bengal region one of the most important centers of higher learning in the ancient world. The Vikramashila Mahavihara, founded by the Pala king Dharmapala around 800 CE, was one of the five major centers of Buddhist learning in India, attracting students from Tibet, China, Java, and other parts of Asia who came to study Buddhist philosophy, logic, grammar, tantra, and other branches of knowledge. The Somapura Mahavihara at Paharpur in present-day Rajshahi district, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was a monastic complex of extraordinary scale and sophistication that served as both a religious institution and a center of higher learning.

These ancient institutions were not universities in the modern sense. They did not grant degrees, maintain faculties in the modern disciplinary sense, or operate within a state-supervised regulatory framework. But they embodied many of the essential features that we associate with genuine higher learning: residence-based communities of scholars and students engaged in sustained inquiry; organized curricula that moved students progressively through levels of knowledge; institutions supported by royal and aristocratic patronage that gave them a degree of institutional stability; and connections to broader international communities of scholarship that prevented intellectual closure and parochialism.

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The destruction of these institutions during the Bakhtiyar Khilji's conquests in the early thirteenth century represents one of the great intellectual disasters of South Asian history. The libraries were burned, the scholars killed or dispersed, and centuries of accumulated knowledge were lost. The significance of this destruction for understanding the subsequent history of education in Bengal cannot be overstated. It severed the region from its indigenous tradition of higher learning and created the conditions in which subsequent educational institutions, both Islamic and colonial, were developed without the benefit of continuity with the pre-existing tradition.

2.2 The Islamic Tradition of Higher Learning in Bengal

When the Sultanate of Bengal established itself in the early fourteenth century, it brought with it the Islamic tradition of higher learning centered on the Madrasa. The Madrasa of Bengal during the Sultanate and Mughal periods represented, at its best, a serious institution of higher learning engaged with the full range of Islamic sciences: Quranic exegesis, Hadith studies, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, logic, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and Arabic and Persian language and literature. The curriculum was structured around the great texts of the Islamic scholarly tradition, and the pedagogical method was the classical Islamic method of close textual reading and disputation.

The Bengal Madrasa tradition was not isolated from the broader currents of Islamic intellectual life. The great Bengali scholars of the Sultanate and Mughal periods were connected to the wider world of Islamic scholarship through the hajj network, through correspondence with scholars in Cairo, Istanbul, and Delhi, and through the regular movement of students and teachers between Bengal and other centers of Islamic learning. This cosmopolitan connection gave the Bengal Madrasa tradition a breadth and intellectual seriousness that has been obscured by the subsequent colonial narrative that portrayed indigenous education in Bengal as narrow, backward, and inferior to the Western education that replaced it.

The decline of the Madrasa system as the primary institution of higher learning in Bengal coincided with the consolidation of British colonial power and the active intervention of the colonial state in the organization and funding of education. As we noted in the historical chapters of Part One, the Madrasa system was progressively marginalized and eventually bifurcated into the government-reorganized Aliya system and the privately maintained Qawmi system, both of which continued to exist alongside the colonial educational institutions but were excluded from the mainstream of what the colonial state recognized and rewarded as genuine higher education.

2.3 The Colonial University: Dhaka University and Its Founding Contradictions

The foundation of the University of Dhaka in 1921 is the most important single event in the history of higher education in the territory that is now Bangladesh, and it is an event saturated with the contradictions that continue to shape higher education to the present day. The university was established as a product of the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the subsequent counter-pressure from the Hindu bhadralok community of Calcutta, who feared that a university in Dhaka would benefit the Muslim population of East Bengal at their expense. The Dhaka University Act of 1920 created an institution that was modeled on the residential universities of

Oxford and Cambridge, with colleges affiliated to the university and residential halls that would provide the kind of character-forming environment that the British liberal tradition associated with genuine higher education.

The founding faculty of the University of Dhaka included a remarkable group of scholars, both British and Indian, who brought genuine intellectual seriousness to the institution. The first Vice-Chancellor, Philip Hartog, was a distinguished educational administrator who had played a major role in developing the university education system of India. Among the early appointments were some of the most distinguished Indian scholars of the period, including the political economist Nawab Ali Chaudhuri and the historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar. The early decades of the University of Dhaka produced several scholars of genuine distinction, including the political theorist and constitutionalist Allama Iqbal (who taught briefly at Dhaka before returning to Lahore), and the literary scholar and cultural critic Dinesh Chandra Sen.

But the founding of the University of Dhaka also embodied a set of contradictions that would prove destructive in the long run. The university was established primarily to serve the educational needs of the Muslim population of East Bengal, but it was organized on the model of the English residential university, using English as its primary medium of instruction and organized around the disciplines and intellectual traditions of British academia. This meant that the institution that was supposed to serve the Muslim population of East Bengal was organized in ways that were culturally alien to most of that population. The Arabic and Islamic studies that the Muslim community would have regarded as central to genuine higher learning were marginal within the disciplinary structure of the new university.

Moreover, the university was established in a political context of acute communal tension, and it became itself a site and a vehicle of communal political struggle. The Language Movement of 1952, in which students and faculty of the University of Dhaka played a central role, was not merely a struggle over linguistic policy. It was a struggle over the cultural identity of the East Bengali Muslim majority, over the relationship between language and self-determination, and over the degree to which the institutions of the Pakistani state, including its universities, would reflect or suppress the cultural distinctiveness of the East Bengali population. The student martyrs of February 21, 1952, commemorated annually in Bangladesh and internationally through UNESCO's declaration of the International Mother Language Day, gave their lives in defense of the right to be educated in their own language, and their sacrifice fundamentally shaped the cultural politics of higher education in Bangladesh for generations thereafter.

2.4 The Post-Independence Expansion and Its Consequences

When Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, it inherited six public universities from the Pakistani period: the University of Dhaka (founded 1921), the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (originally the Engineering College of East Pakistan, subsequently elevated to university status in 1962), the University of Rajshahi (1953), the Bangladesh Agricultural University (originally the Agricultural College, Mymensingh, elevated to university status in 1961), Chittagong University (1966), and Jahangirnagar University (1970). These six institutions were the entire infrastructure of university-level education in a country of approximately 75 million people.

The post-independence decades saw a significant expansion of the public university sector, though the pace and pattern of expansion were shaped more by political considerations than by educational planning or genuine academic need. The establishment of new public universities in different regions of the country was driven in large part by the political logic of distributing nationally visible development investments across different constituencies. A new public university meant jobs for local people, prestige for the region, and political credit for the government that established it. The educational logic of whether a new full-service university was the most effective way to expand higher education access in a particular region was secondary, when it was considered at all.

By 2024, there were 55 public universities in Bangladesh. This expansion, from six in 1971 to 55 in 2024, over roughly five decades, represents an enormous increase in the infrastructure of public higher education. But the quality of this expansion has been deeply uneven, and the political logic that drove it has produced a system that is heavily concentrated in certain disciplines and institutions, that has failed to develop genuine research capacity, and that has consumed a significant share of the higher education budget without producing a commensurate increase in educational quality or social benefit.

The explosion of private universities is an even more dramatic story. As we noted in the search data, Bangladesh had approximately 17 private universities around 2000. By 2025, the number had grown to approximately 113. This expansion, from 17 to 113 over 25 years, represents the most rapid privatization of higher education in South Asia, driven by a combination of unmet public demand, government policy that deliberately encouraged private provision, and the entrepreneurial ambitions of a new class of educational investors who saw university education as a profitable commercial opportunity.

Chapter Three: The Public University -- Sanctuary of Knowledge or Arena of Power?

3.1 The Structure and Organization of Public Universities

Bangladesh's public universities are not a homogeneous group. They range from the oldest and most prestigious institutions, particularly the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), and the University of Rajshahi, which have established faculties, reasonable library resources, and a tradition of academic life that extends back decades, to newly established regional universities that exist primarily on paper, with inadequate infrastructure, untrained faculty, and student bodies so small that the entire rationale for their existence is difficult to justify.

The formal structure of Bangladesh's public universities follows a common pattern that was established in the colonial period and has been preserved largely unchanged through independence and subsequent political transitions. Each university is governed by a Senate, which is the supreme governing body; a Syndicate, which serves as the executive body; an Academic Council, which is responsible for academic affairs; and a Finance Committee. The head of the institution is the Vice-Chancellor, who is appointed by the government (in practice,

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by the Chancellor, who is the President of Bangladesh) and who wields enormous formal authority over the institution. The Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Deans of Faculties, and Chairpersons of Departments complete the formal hierarchy.

This formal structure is, in theory, designed to balance three principles that have historically been in tension in the governance of universities everywhere: the autonomy of the academic community in matters of scholarship and curriculum, the accountability of the institution to the public that funds it, and the authority of the state that has ultimate legal responsibility for the institution's operation. In practice, the formal structure of Bangladeshi public universities has consistently failed to maintain this balance, tilting overwhelmingly toward the authority of the state and away from both academic autonomy and genuine accountability to the public.

3.2 The Pathology of Vice-Chancellors

Perhaps no single institutional feature has done more damage to the quality of academic life in Bangladesh's public universities than the manner in which Vice-Chancellors are appointed. In theory, the Vice-Chancellor of a public university should be the person best qualified, by intellectual achievement, academic leadership experience, and institutional vision, to lead the university toward the fulfillment of its educational mission. In practice, the appointment of Vice-Chancellors in Bangladesh's public universities has been among the most nakedly political processes in the country's entire institutional life.

Under the governments of both major political parties, Vice-Chancellors have been appointed primarily on the basis of their political loyalty to the party in power rather than their academic qualifications or leadership capacity. The Vice-Chancellor, once appointed, has used the patronage resources available to the position, primarily appointment and promotion decisions for faculty, officers, and staff, to build a clientelistic network of institutional supporters aligned with the ruling party. Faculty members with political connections to the ruling party have been appointed, promoted, and assigned to desirable positions; those aligned with the opposition have been marginalized, investigated, or forced out.

The political consequences of this system were made dramatically visible by the events following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in August 2024. As search data reveals, many senior officials at 45 of the 55 public universities went missing following the ouster of the Awami League regime, and resignations of Vice-Chancellors and other senior officials began en masse as students at different universities gave them ultimatums to resign on allegations of political alignment with the deposed government. This wholesale change of leadership at virtually every public university in the country, a change driven not by any assessment of educational performance but by a change in the political wind, is perhaps the most vivid possible demonstration of the extent to which Bangladesh's public universities have been captured by partisan politics.

The damage that this system does to the quality of academic life is profound and multidimensional. It destroys the academic culture of merit and peer evaluation that is the lifeblood of genuine scholarship. It creates a climate of fear and political calculation in which faculty members learn to subordinate their academic judgments to their political positioning. It

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drives the best scholars out of the public university system, either into private universities, international academic positions, or silence. It makes sustained long-term academic planning impossible, because every change of government brings a change of institutional leadership and a reversal of institutional priorities. And it corrupts the university's relationship to knowledge itself, transforming it from an institution dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of truth into an institution dedicated to the politically useful production of credentials.

3.3 Campus Politics and the Culture of Violence

Closely related to the problem of Vice-Chancellor politicization is the problem of campus politics. Bangladesh's public universities have a long and honorable tradition of student political activism, rooted in the history of the Language Movement, the liberation struggle, and the various democratic movements that have punctuated the country's post-independence political history. The student organizations affiliated with the major political parties, most notably the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL, affiliated with the Awami League) and the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD, affiliated with the BNP), have historically played important roles both in campus governance and in national politics.

But this tradition of honorable political activism has been progressively corrupted into something quite different: a system of campus political violence, extortion, and institutionalized criminality that has made the campuses of Bangladesh's public universities genuinely dangerous places for students, faculty, and administrative staff who are not affiliated with the dominant political organization. The Bangladesh Chhatra League, during the period of Awami League government, achieved a level of campus dominance that went far beyond normal political activity. BCL members controlled the allocation of residential hall seats, collecting informal fees from students who wanted access to housing. They controlled the tendering processes for campus construction and supply contracts, extracting commissions in exchange for allowing contracts to proceed. They threatened, assaulted, and in some cases killed students and faculty who challenged their authority or expressed political disagreement.

The July 2024 quota reform movement, which began as a student protest against the discriminatory government job quota system and rapidly evolved into a mass uprising that brought down the Hasina government, was in part a rebellion against this system of campus political dominance. The extraordinary courage displayed by the students who participated in the July-August uprising, confronting police gunfire and the organized violence of BCL members with their bodies and their determination, was a testament to how deeply and how widely the culture of BCL campus dominance was resented.

The fall of the Hasina government opened a brief window of hope for the restoration of genuine academic and political pluralism on university campuses. As the search data indicates, student union elections returned to four major public universities, including Dhaka and Jahangirnagar, in 2025 for the first time in decades. But the nature of these elections, with results that tilted heavily toward candidates backed by Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, raises serious questions about whether campus politics has been genuinely democratized or merely transferred from one form of partisan dominance to another. The cultural disease of campus

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political violence is not cured by changing which faction is dominant; it requires a structural transformation of the relationship between university governance and political parties.

3.4 Academic Quality in the Public Universities: An Honest Assessment

Setting aside the political pathologies, what is the actual state of academic quality in Bangladesh's public universities? The honest answer is that it varies enormously, from genuinely excellent performance in certain departments and at certain institutions to extremely poor performance that amounts, in some cases, to a kind of educational fraud: institutions that take students' time and money and the state's resources but deliver very little in the way of genuine intellectual development or useful professional preparation.

The best of Bangladesh's public universities, particularly BUET in engineering and technology, the University of Dhaka in certain departments in the humanities and social sciences, and Bangladesh Agricultural University in agricultural sciences, maintain academic standards that are broadly competitive with universities of similar resources and in similar economic contexts elsewhere in the world. Faculty members at these institutions publish research in internationally recognized journals, maintain active connections with global scholarly communities, and deliver instruction that, while constrained by inadequate resources and large class sizes, represents genuine intellectual engagement with the disciplines they teach.

But these islands of genuine quality exist within a system that is, in structural terms, deeply dysfunctional. The public university system as a whole faces several interconnected quality challenges. Research productivity is extremely low across the system as a whole: the vast majority of Bangladesh's public university faculty publish little or no research in any peer-reviewed forum, whether international or domestic. The share of education in GDP, as the search data reveals, fell to 1.69 percent in fiscal year 2024, having already declined from 1.83 percent in FY23 and 2.08 percent in FY22. This level of public investment in education is among the lowest in any country in the world, and it is reflected in the chronic underfunding of libraries, laboratories, faculty development, and academic infrastructure across the public university system.

The curriculum in many public university departments has not been substantially revised in decades, and reflects a colonial-era disciplinary structure that is poorly suited to the intellectual and professional demands of the twenty-first century. The pedagogical culture is overwhelmingly lecture-based and assessment-focused, with minimal opportunities for student research, seminar-based discussion, project-based learning, or the other forms of active intellectual engagement that research consistently shows to be the most effective forms of higher learning.

Session jam, the backlog of academic sessions caused by strikes, political disruptions, and administrative failures, has been one of the most chronic and damaging features of the public university experience in Bangladesh. A student who enrolls in a four-year undergraduate degree program at a Bangladeshi public university frequently does not complete the program in four years; five, six, or even seven years are common, wasting the student's time, delaying their entry into the labor market, and destroying the academic rhythm that is essential to genuine intellectual development.

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Chapter Four: The Private University Revolution -- Markets, Quality, and Social Consequence

4.1 The Origins and Expansion of Private Universities

The private university sector in Bangladesh was created by the Private University Act of 1992, enacted during the government of Begum Khaleda Zia, which allowed private entities to establish degree-granting universities for the first time. The Act was a response to two converging pressures: the manifest inability of the public university system to absorb the rapidly growing demand for higher education from Bangladesh's expanding secondary school graduate population, and the global ideological shift toward private provision of public services that characterized the development thinking of the 1990s.

The early private universities, particularly North South University (founded 1992), BRAC University (2001), and East West University (1996), were established with genuine educational ambitions. Their founders included prominent academics and business leaders who believed that private universities could offer a quality of education that was superior to what the politically dysfunctional public system was providing. These early institutions adopted English as their primary medium of instruction, modeled their curricula on American and British universities, recruited faculty with overseas PhDs, and attempted to create a campus culture of academic seriousness that was genuinely different from the political violence and examination-factory culture of the public universities.

Some of these early private universities have partially succeeded in their ambitions. North South University, as the search data notes, has achieved a ranking within the top 800 of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, a remarkable achievement for a Bangladeshi institution. BRAC University has built a reputation for genuine academic quality, particularly in its School of Public Health and its development studies programs, that is recognized internationally. These achievements demonstrate that the private sector can deliver genuine quality, at least at the upper end of the market.

But the private university sector has expanded far beyond these islands of quality. The 113 private universities that existed by 2025 range from genuinely serious academic institutions to what might charitably be called credential shops: institutions that exist primarily to sell degrees to students who lack the academic standing to gain admission to public universities, that maintain minimal academic standards, that employ faculty who are often inadequately qualified, and that deliver little educational value to the students who attend them.

4.2 The Business Model and Its Consequences

Understanding the private university sector requires understanding the business model on which most private universities operate. Private universities in Bangladesh receive no government funding for their regular operations. They are entirely dependent on tuition fees for their operating revenues, and this creates a structural incentive that is profoundly problematic from an

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educational quality standpoint: the institution's financial survival depends on maintaining a sufficient enrollment to cover costs, which creates powerful pressure to admit students who should not be admitted, to retain students who should be failed, to grant degrees to students who have not achieved the standards those degrees represent, and to compete for students on the basis of price and accessibility rather than quality.

The expansion of private university capacity to approximately 1.8 million seats against a dramatically shrinking pool of qualified applicants, the consequence of the sharp fall in HSC pass rates in 2025, has exposed the fragility of the private university business model with brutal clarity. As the search data reveals, many private universities and National University colleges now face the grim reality of failing to attract enough students to sustain operations. The crisis is structurally identical to the "enrollment cliff" that analysts in the United States have warned about for a decade: when the pool of potential students shrinks and the supply of seats remains large, institutions that are unable to compete on the basis of quality find themselves in an existential financial crisis.

The geography of private university expansion has compounded these problems. Private universities have been established primarily in Dhaka and in divisional cities, reflecting the concentration of the paying student population in urban areas. But the mismatch between the locations of private universities and the distribution of the population means that most Bangladeshi students, particularly those from rural areas and lower-income families, have limited access to the private university sector. The students who do have access often cannot afford the fees of the better-quality institutions, and are therefore channeled into the lower-quality institutions where the education-to-cost ratio is deeply unfavorable.

4.3 Private Universities and the Reproduction of Social Inequality

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and educational reproduction, developed in his studies of the French educational system and generalized in his major work "Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture" (1977, with Jean-Claude Passeron), is directly and powerfully relevant to the social dynamics of Bangladesh's private university sector. Bourdieu argued that educational systems do not simply transmit knowledge; they transmit and legitimize the cultural capital of the dominant classes, producing educational success for those students who already possess the cultural dispositions, linguistic habits, and social networks that the educational system rewards, and educational failure or marginalization for those who do not.

In Bangladesh's private university sector, this dynamic operates with particular visibility. The top-tier private universities, which provide the best quality of education, charge the highest fees and therefore serve primarily the children of the wealthy urban middle and upper classes. These students arrive at university already possessing the cultural capital that the university rewards: English language proficiency, exposure to sophisticated reading and intellectual discussion at home, access to supplementary coaching and educational resources, and the social networks that provide access to professional opportunities after graduation.

The lower-tier private universities, which charge lower fees and therefore attract students from less privileged families, provide an education of much lower quality, and their graduates emerge

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into the labor market with credentials that carry little value, in a context where the skills mismatch between what universities teach and what employers need is, as the search data notes, stark and growing.

The result is that the private university sector, rather than democratizing access to quality higher education, has created a new and highly visible axis of inequality: the distinction between the small number of students who can access quality private higher education and the large number who cannot, a distinction that maps closely onto the existing distribution of wealth and cultural capital in Bangladesh's deeply unequal society.

4.4 The National University and the Millions Left Behind

No account of higher education in Bangladesh would be complete without serious attention to the National University, which is not a university in the conventional sense but a massive affiliating institution that oversees the degree programs of approximately 2,300 affiliated colleges across the country. Established in 1992, the National University is, by enrollment, one of the largest higher education institutions in the world, with millions of students pursuing degree courses through affiliated colleges in virtually every district of Bangladesh.

The National University represents the true front line of higher education access in Bangladesh. The students who attend National University-affiliated colleges are overwhelmingly from rural backgrounds, from lower-income families, and from educational backgrounds that have not prepared them adequately for university-level study. They are the students for whom neither the prestigious public universities nor the quality private universities are realistic options, and the National University is their last and often their only access point to a recognized degree.

But the quality of education available through the National University system is, almost uniformly, extremely poor. The affiliated colleges are typically overcrowded, under-resourced, and staffed by poorly paid and inadequately qualified faculty. The curriculum is almost entirely lecture-based and examination-oriented, with no scope for the kind of active, inquiry-based learning that genuine intellectual development requires. The examinations are subject to widespread and well-documented cheating, and the degrees that are granted on their basis frequently represent little genuine learning.

The National University is therefore simultaneously Bangladesh's most important instrument of higher education access and its greatest single source of educational waste. It provides millions of students with access to a credential that does not reliably represent competence, that therefore has little value in the labor market, and that consumes four or more years of a young person's life that could, if differently organized, have been devoted to learning that genuinely expands their capabilities and opportunities.

Chapter Five: The University Grants Commission and the Architecture of Higher Education Governance

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5.1 The UGC: Design, Function, and Failure

The University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) was established on 16 December 1972, the first anniversary of the country's liberation, by Presidential Order No. 10 of 1973. Its establishment was modeled on the University Grants Committee of the United Kingdom, which had been founded in 1919 to serve as a buffer body between the British government and the universities, channeling state funding to universities while protecting their autonomy from direct government interference.

The principle underlying the UGC model is architecturally elegant and philosophically serious: universities need public funding because they serve public purposes, but they also need protection from direct government control because genuinely scholarly inquiry, which requires the freedom to follow evidence wherever it leads and to challenge received wisdom including the wisdom of governments, cannot flourish in an institution that is directly subject to political authority. The buffer body resolves this tension by interposing a body of academic professionals between the government and the universities, allowing government priorities to inform but not directly determine the allocation of resources and the definition of academic standards.

In practice, the UGC of Bangladesh has not functioned as an effective buffer body. Its ability to protect university autonomy from government interference has been minimal, because it is itself subject to government appointment and has consistently been composed of individuals whose primary qualification is loyalty to the government in power rather than distinguished academic service. Its ability to ensure academic quality has been limited by inadequate resources, limited regulatory authority, and the same culture of political influence that has corrupted the institutions it is supposed to oversee.

The UGC's performance as a regulator of private universities has been particularly problematic. In theory, it is responsible for approving the establishment of new private universities, monitoring their academic standards, and recommending the revocation of degree-awarding powers from institutions that fail to meet minimum standards. In practice, the approval process has been subject to political influence, with private universities being approved on the basis of connections to the ruling party rather than genuine assessment of their academic plans and institutional capacity. The UGC has recommended the closure of some institutions that were manifestly unfit, but enforcement has been slow and incomplete, and the overall regulatory framework has been insufficient to prevent the proliferation of low-quality institutions.

5.2 The Proposed Bangladesh Higher Education Commission: A New Beginning?

The most significant recent development in the governance of Bangladesh's higher education system is the proposal, introduced in late 2025 by the interim government following the August 2024 political transition, to dissolve the UGC and replace it with a new body called the Bangladesh Commission on Higher Education (BCHE).

As the search data reveals, the draft "Bangladesh Commission on Higher Education Ordinance, 2025" was circulated by the Secondary and Higher Education Division of the Ministry of Education in December 2025. The draft proposes a body with a chairman of cabinet minister

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rank, eight full-time commissioners, and ten part-time members. The proposed commission would have significantly expanded powers compared to the UGC, including the authority to oversee universities' financial management and budget implementation, to investigate allegations of academic, administrative, or financial irregularities, to set uniform policies for the recruitment, promotion, and service conditions of teachers across universities, and to establish uniform admission policies for private universities. Most strikingly, the draft proposes that the commission will determine and publish rankings of all universities every three years, with institutions that consistently perform poorly placed under "special supervision."

This proposal represents the most ambitious attempt to restructure higher education governance in Bangladesh since the establishment of the UGC itself in 1973. The elevation of the chairmanship to cabinet minister rank signals a political commitment to giving higher education governance greater political weight. The expanded accountability functions, including financial oversight and the power to investigate irregularities, are responses to the chronic governance failures of the public university system. The ranking mechanism represents an attempt to introduce reputational accountability alongside the formal regulatory accountability that the existing system has failed to deliver.

But the proposal also raises important and potentially problematic questions about the balance between accountability and autonomy. A body with the power to investigate irregularities, to set service conditions across universities, and to impose "special supervision" on poorly performing institutions exercises a degree of control over academic institutions that could, if exercised without appropriate independence and procedural safeguards, amount to the kind of direct government control that the buffer body model was designed to prevent. The critical question about the BCHE is not whether it has more power than the UGC but whether it is genuinely independent of the government that creates and funds it. If the BCHE chairman and commissioners are appointed primarily on the basis of political loyalty, if its investigations are subject to government direction, and if its ranking criteria are designed to advantage politically favored institutions, then the new body will simply reproduce the failures of the old one in a more elaborate institutional form.

The genuinely important reform is not the institutional form of the regulatory body but the culture of appointment, the degree of genuine independence from political interference, and the capacity to enforce accountability regardless of the political connections of those being held to account. These are cultural and political challenges as much as they are institutional design challenges, and they cannot be resolved simply by creating a new body with a new name and expanded formal powers.

5.3 University Autonomy and Its Constitutional Dimensions

The question of university autonomy has important constitutional and jurisprudential dimensions that are not adequately recognized in the current policy debate about higher education governance in Bangladesh. The Constitution of Bangladesh does not explicitly protect university autonomy in the way that some constitutional systems protect academic freedom. But constitutional scholars have argued that the constitutional values of free thought, free expression,

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and free inquiry, protected by Article 39 of the Constitution, have implications for university governance that amount to a constitutional commitment to meaningful academic autonomy.

The case for constitutional protection of university autonomy rests on several interconnected arguments. First, the university is one of the primary social institutions through which the constitutional right to free thought and free expression is realized in practice. A university that is subject to direct political control cannot serve this constitutional function. Second, the university's role in the production of knowledge that is necessary for informed democratic deliberation gives it a constitutional significance that goes beyond its role as an educational institution. A democracy depends on an informed citizenry; an informed citizenry depends on the free production and dissemination of knowledge; the free production of knowledge depends on universities that are genuinely free from political direction. Third, the constitutional commitment to the development of a capable, knowledgeable, and democratically engaged citizenry implies a commitment to the kind of higher education that only genuinely autonomous universities can provide.

These constitutional arguments have been made in the context of challenges to government interference in university governance, including challenges to the political appointment of Vice-Chancellors and to government directives concerning the content of academic programs. The courts have not yet given these arguments the weight they deserve, but the development of a jurisprudence of university autonomy as a constitutional value would provide an important legal protection against the kind of direct political colonization of universities that has been the norm in Bangladesh since independence.

Chapter Six: The Political Economy of Higher Education -- Who Pays, Who Benefits, Who Decides

6.1 Financing Higher Education: The Crisis of Chronic Underfunding

The political economy of higher education in Bangladesh begins with the most fundamental of all resource questions: how much does the country invest in its universities and colleges, and is it enough? The answer to the first part of this question is precise and deeply troubling: Bangladesh invests a smaller proportion of its national income in education, including higher education, than almost any country in the world at a comparable level of development. The share of education in GDP declined to 1.69 percent in fiscal year 2024, having fallen from 2.08 percent in FY22. The international benchmark recommended by UNESCO for countries at Bangladesh's level of development is 4 to 6 percent of GDP. Bangladesh spends less than half the minimum of this range on education overall, and the share devoted to higher education is a small fraction of even this inadequate total.

The consequences of chronic underfunding are visible at every point of the public university system. Libraries are underfunded and their collections are typically decades out of date. Laboratories are inadequately equipped for research-grade science. Faculty salaries are too low to attract or retain the best candidates, who are able to earn far more in the private sector or

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abroad. Physical infrastructure is deteriorating in many institutions. Information technology infrastructure is inadequate for the demands of twenty-first-century academic work. The contrast between the resource endowment of Bangladesh's best public universities and the resource endowment of comparable institutions in countries like India, South Korea, or Malaysia, countries that were at similar levels of development thirty to forty years ago, is striking and sobering.

The political economy of this chronic underfunding is complex. On the revenue side, Bangladesh's tax revenue as a share of GDP is among the lowest in the region, reflecting the combined effects of a large informal economy, significant tax evasion among the wealthy, and the political difficulty of expanding the tax base. On the expenditure side, education has consistently lost in the competition for budget allocations to security, infrastructure, and debt service, reflecting both the political priorities of successive governments and the relative weakness of the education sector as a political constituency.

The World Bank and other international development organizations have argued consistently and for decades that Bangladesh should increase its investment in education. This argument is correct in principle but insufficient in practice, because it does not adequately address the political economy reasons why successive governments have not increased educational investment. The political incentive structure for investment in higher education is relatively weak: the benefits of investment in higher education are diffuse, long-term, and distributed across the population in ways that are difficult to attribute to specific political actors; the costs are immediate and concentrated in the form of tax increases or reductions in spending on more politically salient budget items. Until the political incentive structure changes, the argument for increased investment in higher education, however well-founded in economic and educational logic, will continue to produce inadequate results.

6.2 The Human Capital Framework and Its Limitations

The dominant framework for analyzing the economics of higher education in Bangladesh is human capital theory, developed by economists Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker and subsequently adopted as the organizing framework for the World Bank's education sector lending and policy advice. Human capital theory holds that education is an investment in the productive capacity of individuals: educated individuals are more productive workers, earn higher wages, and contribute more to economic growth than uneducated ones. At the aggregate level, investment in education increases the human capital stock of an economy, raising productivity, innovation capacity, and economic growth rates.

The human capital framework has been enormously influential in shaping both the analytical tools and the policy prescriptions of education reform in Bangladesh. Its central recommendation for higher education, that resources should be allocated to the types of higher education that have the highest returns in terms of graduate earnings and economic productivity, has driven the relative emphasis on STEM education, technical and vocational higher education, and business and management programs, at the expense of the humanities, arts, and basic sciences.

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But human capital theory, for all its practical influence, is subject to important theoretical and empirical limitations that are particularly salient in the Bangladeshi context. Theoretically, the framework assumes that the labor market accurately rewards the productive contribution of educated workers, so that graduate wage rates can be used as reliable proxies for the social productivity of different types of higher education. But in Bangladesh, as in many other developing country contexts, the labor market is highly segmented, subject to large informational asymmetries, and heavily influenced by non-productivity factors including social class, gender, geographic location, and, crucially, political connections. Wages therefore provide unreliable signals of productive contribution.

Empirically, the human capital prediction that investment in higher education will produce economic growth and reduce unemployment has been dramatically falsified in the Bangladeshi context. As the search data reveals, more than 2.6 million people were unemployed in Bangladesh in 2024, and nearly 900,000 of them, approximately one in three of the unemployed, held university degrees. The massive expansion of higher education that has occurred over the past three decades has produced, not the economic growth dividend that human capital theory predicted, but a massive graduate unemployment and underemployment crisis, as hundreds of thousands of degree-holders each year enter a labor market that cannot absorb them in roles that correspond to their qualifications.

This graduate unemployment crisis is not simply a mismatch problem that can be solved by better alignment of academic programs with labor market demands, though such alignment would certainly help at the margins. It is a structural problem rooted in the fact that Bangladesh's economic structure, dominated by low-value-added garment manufacturing and remittance-receiving rural households, does not generate sufficient demand for skilled professional labor to absorb the output of a rapidly expanding higher education system. The appropriate policy response to this structural problem requires not just educational reform but economic restructuring, and the failure to acknowledge this connection produces education policy that treats the education system as the cause of the graduate unemployment crisis rather than as one part of a much larger structural problem.

6.3 The Economics of Brain Drain and the Crisis of Academic Talent

One of the most significant and least adequately addressed economic consequences of Bangladesh's underinvestment in higher education is the hemorrhage of academic talent through what is commonly called brain drain. The most intellectually able graduates of Bangladesh's universities, those who would be the natural candidates for academic careers and who would constitute the next generation of university teachers and researchers, are systematically drawn away from the Bangladeshi higher education system by the vastly superior conditions of employment, research resources, and intellectual community available in overseas universities.

As the search data shows, the number of Bangladeshi students pursuing higher education abroad has more than doubled over the past decade, rising from about 24,000 in 2013 to nearly 53,000 in 2023. The financial cost of this outflow is staggering: Bangladesh legally transferred more than 3.11 billion dollars for overseas education over the nine fiscal years ending in FY2024-25, with

the figure reaching a record 662 million dollars in that year alone. And as the search data notes, experts estimate that informal transfers could raise the true total to nearly 12 billion dollars.

But the economic cost of brain drain, significant as it is, is less important than the intellectual cost. Bangladesh loses its most capable minds precisely when it most needs to build intellectual capital within its own higher education system. The graduate students who go to MIT, Cambridge, Tokyo, or Toronto to do their PhDs, and who then accept postdoctoral positions and eventually faculty appointments at their host institutions, are not traitors or irresponsible individuals. They are rational actors responding to a system of incentives in which the intellectual and material conditions of academic life abroad are simply incomparably superior to those available at home. The solution to brain drain is not to restrict the movement of scholars, which would be both wrong and ineffective, but to make the intellectual and material conditions of academic life in Bangladesh's universities good enough to attract and retain serious scholars. This requires, in the first instance, the dramatic increase in educational investment that successive governments have failed to provide.

6.4 The International Development Community and Its Role

The international development community, particularly the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and USAID, has played a significant role in shaping the development of Bangladesh's higher education system, through both direct financial support and the policy conditions and advice that accompany that support. This role has been simultaneously helpful and problematic, reflecting the general tensions between the global development agenda and the specific educational needs of individual developing countries.

The financial support that international development organizations have provided to higher education in Bangladesh has supplemented Bangladesh's own inadequate investment and has funded many specific improvements in institutional capacity, infrastructure, and faculty development. The World Bank's Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP), which ran from 2009 to 2018, funded a series of institutional improvement grants that supported curriculum reform, laboratory upgrading, faculty development, and quality assurance activities at participating public and private universities. Evaluations of the project found mixed results: significant improvements in the participating institutions, but limited systemic impact, as the improvements proved difficult to sustain after project funding ended.

The more problematic dimension of the international development community's involvement in Bangladesh's higher education is the influence of international development ideology on the framing of higher education policy. The human capital framework, with its emphasis on returns to education, skill-economy alignment, and private provision of higher education, has been heavily promoted by the World Bank and has shaped both the policy language and the specific policy choices of successive Bangladeshi governments in ways that have not always served the best interests of the country's educational development.

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Chapter Seven: Research, Knowledge Production, and the Crisis of Academic Life

7.1 The Research Deficit and Its Causes

Research production is, by virtually any measure, one of the weakest dimensions of Bangladesh's higher education system. The total number of peer-reviewed academic publications produced by Bangladeshi researchers in internationally indexed journals is extremely low relative to the country's population, GDP, and higher education enrollment. While there has been some growth in research output over the past decade, driven partly by the introduction of publication requirements for academic promotion in some institutions, the absolute level of research productivity remains far below the level that a country of Bangladesh's educational aspirations and economic trajectory requires.

The causes of this research deficit are multiple, interacting, and deeply structural. The most fundamental cause is inadequate funding for research. Research costs money: it requires laboratory equipment, library resources, access to databases and journals, research assistants, field work, and time free from teaching and administrative duties. Bangladesh's public universities have very little money for any of these things, and the private universities, which are structurally oriented toward teaching rather than research, have even less.

The second major cause is the inadequacy of doctoral education. Research is primarily a product of researchers, and researchers are primarily formed through doctoral education. Bangladesh's capacity for high-quality doctoral education is very limited. The number of PhD programs in Bangladesh's universities is small relative to the size of the academic system, many of the existing programs are of questionable quality, and the structural conditions for successful doctoral education, including adequate research funding, competent supervisors, functioning research infrastructure, and peer community of active scholars, are available in only a small number of departments at a small number of institutions. The result is that most Bangladeshi academics who produce research at a serious level either received their doctoral education overseas or are effectively self-taught researchers who have developed their research skills through extraordinary individual effort in the face of systemic indifference.

The third major cause is the culture of academic life in most Bangladeshi universities, which does not value or reward research. Academic promotion in Bangladesh's public universities has historically been primarily determined by seniority rather than by research performance or teaching quality. The introduction of some publication requirements for promotion has begun to change this, but the cultural inertia is enormous, and the quality controls on the publications that count for promotion are weak enough that the publication requirement has in some cases incentivized submission to predatory journals rather than genuine scholarly engagement with the international academic community.

7.2 The Predatory Journal Crisis

The phenomenon of predatory journals, academic journals that claim to be peer-reviewed but that in practice will publish virtually anything for a fee, has had a particularly damaging impact on Bangladesh's academic research culture. In the context of a promotion system that counts

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publications without adequately assessing their quality, the existence of thousands of predatory journals that will publish any submission for a few hundred dollars provides a powerful incentive for academics under publication pressure to take the path of least resistance.

Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of publication in predatory journals of any country in the world, a fact that is simultaneously a testament to the publication pressure that Bangladeshi academics are under and a devastating commentary on the quality assurance systems of the academic promotion process. The prevalence of predatory journal publications in the CVs of Bangladeshi academic faculty has had several damaging consequences: it has degraded the information content of academic credentials, making it genuinely difficult to distinguish serious researchers from credential-shoppers; it has undermined the credibility of Bangladeshi academic research in the international scholarly community; and it has diverted the limited research budgets of academic departments into the pockets of predatory journal operators rather than into the production of genuine knowledge.

The solution to the predatory journal problem requires both a carrot and a stick: the carrot of genuine support for research, including funding for the open-access publication fees charged by legitimate peer-reviewed journals; and the stick of a quality assessment process for promotion that meaningfully distinguishes between publications in legitimate peer-reviewed journals and publications in predatory outlets. Neither carrot nor stick has yet been adequately deployed in Bangladesh's public university system.

7.3 The Relationship Between Research and Teaching

One of the most important and most neglected dimensions of Bangladesh's higher education crisis is the relationship between research and teaching. In the most sophisticated tradition of university education, associated with the Humboldtian model, research and teaching are not separate activities but different expressions of the same fundamental commitment to inquiry-based learning. The professor who teaches from active engagement with the frontier of knowledge in her discipline teaches differently from the professor who teaches from a fixed body of received knowledge: she teaches not just what is known but how it comes to be known, how knowledge claims are evaluated and revised, and what it means to think as a disciplined scholar rather than as a passive recipient of transmitted information.

In Bangladesh's public universities, the separation between research and teaching is almost complete. The vast majority of public university teachers are not active researchers, and therefore cannot teach from the standpoint of active engagement with the frontier of their disciplines. They teach from textbooks, often from old textbooks, and they assess student learning primarily through examinations that test memory rather than understanding or the capacity for original thought. This teaching-without-research model is not simply a second-best alternative to the research-integrated model: it is a fundamentally different activity that produces a fundamentally different kind of intellectual formation in students.

The development of a research culture in Bangladesh's universities is therefore not simply a matter of adding research to an existing academic activity. It requires a transformation of the entire culture of academic life, from a culture of credential transmission to a culture of

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knowledge production, inquiry, and critical engagement. This transformation is possible, as the examples of South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam demonstrate, but it requires sustained commitment, adequate resources, and the development of institutional structures that genuinely reward and support scholarly inquiry rather than merely mandating it.

Chapter Eight: Quality Assurance and Accreditation -- Between Standards and Compliance

8.1 The Quality Assurance Framework

Bangladesh's higher education quality assurance system is organized around several mechanisms: the UGC's regulatory oversight of both public and private universities; the Accreditation Council for Higher Education (which has been proposed but not yet fully operationalized); the Annual Performance Agreements between the UGC and public universities; and the Teaching Quality Improvement Project (TQI) supported by international development partners. In addition, several of Bangladesh's universities have sought and in some cases received international accreditation from subject-specific accreditation bodies.

The overall quality assurance framework is, in the assessment of virtually every independent evaluation, inadequate to the challenge it faces. The UGC lacks the human resources, the technical capacity, and, critically, the political independence to conduct rigorous, consistent quality assessment of 55 public and 113 private universities. Its regulatory focus has been primarily on input standards, whether institutions have the required faculty numbers, physical facilities, and library resources, rather than on outcome quality, whether institutions are actually producing graduates with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities that their degrees represent.

Input-based quality assurance, while better than no quality assurance, has several well-documented weaknesses. It is relatively easy to game: institutions can meet minimum input standards on paper while failing to provide the quality of educational experience that those standards are supposed to ensure. It does not capture the dynamic and relational dimensions of educational quality, including the quality of teaching, the intellectual culture of the institution, and the degree to which students are genuinely engaged in learning. And it provides no incentive for institutions that meet minimum standards to exceed them, because compliance with minimum standards is rewarded equally whether the institution delivers minimum quality or exceptional quality.

The proposed Bangladesh Higher Education Commission Ordinance of 2025, with its provisions for university rankings published every three years and for "special supervision" of consistently poor performers, represents a move toward a more outcome-focused accountability framework. The ranking mechanism in particular, if well-designed and rigorously implemented, could provide a powerful public accountability mechanism that complements the formal regulatory system. But the design of the ranking criteria is critical: rankings that overweight research output will favor research-intensive institutions and disadvantage teaching-focused ones; rankings that overweight employability outcomes will incentivize "teaching to the labor market" rather than

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holistic educational development; and rankings that are subject to political influence will, like every other regulatory mechanism in Bangladesh's educational system that has been subject to political influence, be corrupted.

8.2 International Accreditation and Its Significance

Several of Bangladesh's better private universities have sought international accreditation from organizations such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) for their business schools, and various engineering and science accreditation bodies. The pursuit of international accreditation is both a genuine quality improvement initiative and a marketing strategy, as internationally accredited programs command higher fees and attract more capable students.

The value of international accreditation from the perspective of higher education quality is genuine but limited. Accreditation processes require institutions to conduct systematic self-assessment against defined quality standards, and this self-assessment process, if conducted seriously rather than as a compliance exercise, can be a powerful driver of quality improvement. But international accreditation standards are developed in the context of high-income country educational systems, and their straightforward application to the Bangladeshi context can produce a form of quality compliance that is disconnected from the specific educational needs and social context of Bangladeshi students and the Bangladeshi economy.

A more sophisticated approach to quality assurance would develop Bangladesh-specific quality standards that are informed by, but not simply copied from, international standards, and that reflect Bangladesh's own educational priorities and development needs. This requires precisely the kind of high-quality, politically independent expert body that the proposed Bangladesh Higher Education Commission could, in theory, become.

8.3 The Accreditation Council: Proposal and Reality

The proposal to establish an Accreditation Council for Higher Education in Bangladesh has been debated since the mid-2000s and has been included in successive higher education strategic plans. Its implementation has been repeatedly delayed by institutional inertia, political conflict over the design of the accreditation system, and the competing interests of the institutions that would be subject to accreditation.

The case for a genuinely independent, academically rigorous accreditation council is compelling. Accreditation by an independent body that assesses institutions against transparent, rigorous, and publicly accountable standards provides a form of quality assurance that is more credible, more comprehensive, and more effective than regulatory oversight by a government body that is subject to political influence. It provides students with reliable information about institutional quality. It provides employers with a credible signal of graduate competence. It provides institutions with a framework for self-improvement that goes beyond minimum compliance. And it provides the government with information about the state of the system that is independent of the institutions' own self-reporting.

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The delays in establishing the accreditation council reflect the political economy of quality assurance: the institutions that would be most affected by rigorous accreditation, particularly the lower-quality private universities that currently profit from credential sales, have strong incentives to resist or delay the establishment of a system that would expose their inadequacies. The political connections of many private university owners give them the access to delay regulatory developments that threaten their business models. Overcoming this political economy obstacle requires a political commitment to quality that transcends the interests of the educational entrepreneurs who have built profitable businesses on the foundation of low-quality credentials.

Chapter Nine: Higher Education and the Labor Market -- The Graduate Unemployment Crisis

9.1 The Scale of the Crisis

The most visible and socially significant failure of Bangladesh's higher education system is its inability to prepare graduates for productive employment. As noted in earlier chapters, more than 2.6 million people were unemployed in Bangladesh in 2024, and nearly 900,000 of them held university degrees. This means that university education, rather than being a reliable pathway to employment, has become in many cases a pathway to qualified unemployment: graduates who possess credentials that signal educational achievement but who lack the skills, knowledge, and professional competencies that employers require.

The social and political consequences of this graduate unemployment crisis are profound. The July 2024 quota reform movement, which began as a student protest against the allocation of government jobs and rapidly evolved into the uprising that brought down the Hasina government, was fundamentally a manifestation of graduate frustration with a system that had promised economic opportunity through education and failed to deliver it. The rage of young graduates who had invested years of their lives and their families' financial resources in university education, only to find themselves unable to secure employment commensurate with their qualifications, is not simply an educational problem. It is a political time bomb, and its explosion in 2024 should be understood as a warning of what happens when an educational system fails systematically to deliver on the promise of social mobility that it makes to millions of ambitious young people and their families.

9.2 The Skills Mismatch: Causes and Dimensions

The skills mismatch between what Bangladesh's universities produce and what Bangladesh's labor market requires has several interconnected dimensions. At the technical level, university curricula in Bangladesh are often significantly out of date, reflecting the disciplinary knowledge of the past rather than the skills needed for the present economy. The rapid changes in the global economy, particularly the accelerating digitalization of work, the rise of data analytics and artificial intelligence in all sectors, the growing importance of financial technology, and the

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expanding demand for professional services in health, law, and management, require skills and knowledge that most Bangladeshi university curricula have been slow to incorporate.

At the soft skills level, which employers consistently identify as among the most important determinants of graduate employability, the deficiencies are even more pronounced. Critical thinking, problem-solving, written and oral communication, teamwork, creativity, and digital literacy are precisely the skills that a rote-learning, lecture-dominated, examination-focused educational system is least likely to develop, and these are also precisely the skills that employers in Bangladesh most frequently identify as lacking in university graduates.

At the language level, the dominance of Bengali as the medium of instruction in most of Bangladesh's universities creates a significant disadvantage for graduates seeking employment in the many sectors, including international trade, garment manufacturing management, tourism, and global professional services, in which English language proficiency is essential. Students who are educated in Bengali but who need to function professionally in English emerge from their university education with a fundamental handicap that their degree does not equip them to overcome.

9.3 The Structural Unemployment Problem

Beyond the skills mismatch, there is a more fundamental structural problem: the structure of Bangladesh's economy does not generate sufficient demand for university-educated professionals to absorb the output of a rapidly expanding university system. Bangladesh's economy is dominated by two sectors: the ready-made garment industry, which is the largest single source of export earnings and formal sector employment, and agriculture, which remains the largest source of livelihood for the rural majority. Neither sector generates large-scale demand for the kinds of skills that university education in its current form produces.

The garment industry's employment base is primarily low-skilled production workers. While the industry does employ significant numbers of university graduates in management, design, and quality control positions, these positions represent a small fraction of the industry's total workforce, and the demand for them is growing far more slowly than the supply of graduates who want to fill them. Agriculture, despite the significant modernization of the sector over the past three decades, remains predominantly organized around small, household-based farms that provide livelihoods but not the kind of professional employment that university graduates seek.

The sectors that generate large-scale demand for university graduates, particularly professional services, information technology, research and development, and knowledge-intensive manufacturing, are present in Bangladesh but are much smaller relative to the overall economy than in countries like India, South Korea, or Malaysia, where similar levels of investment in higher education have produced very different labor market outcomes. Growing these sectors, and thereby creating the demand for graduates that the expanding higher education system is producing, requires not just educational reform but a broader strategy of economic structural transformation that is beyond the scope of educational policy alone.

9.4 Graduate Emigration and its Complex Consequences

Bangladesh's response to the graduate unemployment crisis has, in significant part, been the same as its response to rural poverty and agricultural underemployment: emigration. The export of labor, including increasingly skilled and educated labor, is a major component of Bangladesh's economic strategy, generating remittance flows that are among the most important sources of foreign exchange for the country.

The emigration of university graduates to work in the Gulf states, Malaysia, and other labor-receiving countries represents a complex phenomenon with both positive and negative dimensions. On the positive side, it provides income to graduates and their families, earns foreign exchange for the country, and in some cases exposes graduates to higher-productivity work environments that develop their skills and professional capacities. On the negative side, as the search data notes, each student who leaves represents both a personal investment and a national loss: the country spends years educating young minds, only to see them contribute their talents to foreign economies.

The more concerning form of graduate emigration is the permanent departure of highly educated professionals to Western countries and to high-income countries in Asia, the brain drain that depletes Bangladesh's most valuable human capital and that tends to be largely irreversible. The search data shows that the number of Bangladeshi students studying abroad has more than doubled over the past decade. Many of these students, once they complete their studies, do not return to Bangladesh. They settle in their country of study, taking up professional positions and building lives that contribute to the knowledge economies of those countries rather than to Bangladesh's own development.

Chapter Ten: The Digital Transformation of Higher Education -- Promise, Progress, and the Persistence of the Divide

10.1 COVID-19 as an Accelerator

The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the closure of Bangladesh's universities for extended periods beginning in March 2020, served as an involuntary and abrupt accelerator of the digital transformation of higher education. Virtually overnight, universities that had barely used digital technologies for teaching were forced to attempt emergency remote teaching, confronting simultaneously the inadequacy of their digital infrastructure, the limited digital skills of both faculty and students, and the massive inequalities in digital access between urban and rural, rich and poor populations.

As the research data reveals, this emergency remote teaching was conducted under conditions of significant constraint. Lack of access to devices, online resources, and training posed major challenges. Teachers were obliged to conduct emergency remote teaching without much planning and preparation. Infrastructural differences observed among various parts of the country resulted in internet speed disparities. Teachers and students in rural areas of Bangladesh had limited, restricted, or no access to the internet.

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Despite these constraints, the pandemic experience also produced important learning. As the research published in Cogent Education in 2025 finds, the pandemic forced experimentation with technologies and demonstrated that universities that develop digital capabilities can pivot smoothly through crises, whether pandemics or other disruptions. Faculty members who had never used digital teaching tools were forced to develop some level of digital competency. Institutions that had not invested in learning management systems were forced to consider whether such investments were necessary. Students who had not engaged with online learning platforms were exposed to new modes of accessing educational content.

The post-pandemic question for Bangladesh's higher education system is how to build on this experience to develop a genuine digital transformation of higher education that is equitable, pedagogically sound, and institutionally sustainable, rather than simply perpetuating the emergency adaptations of the pandemic period in a slightly improved form.

10.2 The Promise of Open and Distance Learning

Bangladesh has a significant history with open and distance learning that predates the digital era. The Bangladesh Open University (BOU), established in 1992, is the only open university in Bangladesh and was designed to provide access to higher education for those who cannot access residential universities due to geographic, economic, or social constraints. BOU has enrolled millions of students over its history and has played an important role in extending higher education access to populations that the conventional university system has not reached.

But BOU's record of academic quality has been mixed, and its potential as a vehicle for democratizing access to quality higher education has been limited by several structural constraints. The distance learning model that BOU uses is based primarily on print materials and face-to-face tutorial sessions at study centers, rather than on the interactive digital learning platforms that have transformed open and distance learning in countries with more developed digital infrastructure. The faculty who produce BOU's learning materials are not always the most distinguished academic experts in their fields. And the institutional culture of BOU has not always been oriented toward the kind of continuous quality improvement that genuine excellence in distance learning requires.

The digitalization of open and distance learning, if properly resourced and designed, offers the possibility of dramatically improving both the quality and the reach of higher education access in Bangladesh. Digital learning platforms can provide interactive, engaging, and pedagogically sophisticated learning experiences that are superior in many respects to the print-based distance learning of the BOU model. They can be accessed by students anywhere in the country with a smartphone and a mobile data connection. They can be updated continuously as new knowledge is produced, rather than becoming outdated as print materials typically do. And they can be personalized to individual student learning needs in ways that standardized print materials cannot.

10.3 Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Higher Education

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The rapid development of artificial intelligence, and particularly of large language models of the kind exemplified by systems like GPT-4 and Claude, represents one of the most significant technological challenges and opportunities that Bangladesh's higher education system faces. These systems are capable of producing text, answering questions, analyzing data, and solving problems at a level of sophistication that raises profound questions about the future of many aspects of higher education: the nature of assessment, the role of lectures and textbooks, the skills that graduates need to develop, and the relationship between human intelligence and machine intelligence in the production and transmission of knowledge.

The challenge that AI poses to Bangladesh's higher education system is particularly acute because so much of the assessment in Bangladesh's universities is based on the kinds of tasks that AI systems can now perform with remarkable facility: answering examination questions by reproducing memorized information, writing essays that follow conventional academic formats, and solving standard mathematical and scientific problems using well-established techniques. If assessment continues to focus on these tasks, the development of sophisticated AI tools that can perform them automatically will render much of Bangladesh's university assessment meaningless as a measure of genuine learning.

But the opportunity that AI represents is equally significant. AI tools can serve as powerful learning assistants, providing students with immediate, personalized feedback on their work, explaining concepts at multiple levels of complexity, suggesting resources for further exploration, and helping students to develop their writing and analytical skills through iterative practice. For students in Bangladesh who lack access to human tutors, mentors, and academic advisors, AI tools can partially substitute for these human resources, democratizing access to intellectual support that has historically been available only to the most privileged students.

Bangladesh's universities have, as of early 2026, barely begun to engage with the implications of AI for higher education. Policies on the use of AI tools by students are largely absent or based on outright prohibition, which is both unenforceable and educationally counterproductive. The development of a sophisticated, evidence-based policy framework for AI in higher education, one that distinguishes between legitimate academic uses of AI tools and forms of AI use that undermine genuine learning, is an urgent priority for Bangladesh's higher education governance.

10.4 The Digital Divide and Higher Education Equity

Any account of digital transformation in higher education must engage seriously with the digital divide, the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not, because this gap maps closely onto existing inequalities of income, geography, and gender, and therefore threatens to deepen rather than reduce educational inequality if digital transformation is implemented without attention to equity.

In Bangladesh, the digital divide is significant. Mobile phone ownership is now widespread, but smartphone ownership and access to affordable mobile data are distributed unevenly, with urban, higher-income populations having much better access than rural, lower-income populations. The physical infrastructure for high-speed internet, which is essential for the most resource-intensive forms of online learning, is concentrated in urban areas and is entirely absent in many rural and

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remote parts of the country. Female students, who face additional barriers to technology access rooted in social norms about women's use of digital technologies, are particularly disadvantaged.

A digital transformation of higher education that does not address the digital divide will produce a bifurcated system in which students with good digital access receive a qualitatively superior education to those without it, compounding the existing inequalities in access to quality higher education. Addressing the digital divide requires not only investment in digital infrastructure but also the development of low-bandwidth, mobile-friendly educational content, community-based digital access points in rural areas, and social programs that reduce gender-based barriers to technology access.

Chapter Eleven: Comparative Perspectives -- What Bangladesh Can Learn and What It Teaches

11.1 The East Asian Model: South Korea, Japan, and Singapore

The educational development trajectories of South Korea, Japan, and Singapore offer perhaps the most instructive comparative perspectives for Bangladesh, not because their contexts are similar to Bangladesh's, which they are not, but because all three countries have achieved in a relatively short historical period a transformation of higher education quality that moved them from conditions not entirely unlike Bangladesh's current situation to the achievement of genuinely world-class university systems.

South Korea's transformation of higher education is the most dramatic and most directly relevant. In the 1950s, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world, with a largely illiterate population, virtually no research capacity, and a handful of colonial-era universities of modest quality. By the 2000s, South Korea had achieved one of the highest higher education participation rates in the world, its universities were producing world-class research in engineering, science, and technology, and its graduates were powering the development of a high-income, knowledge-intensive economy.

The South Korean model involved several elements that are potentially relevant to Bangladesh: a massive and sustained increase in public investment in education at all levels; a determined effort to build research capacity in universities, particularly in the science and engineering disciplines most relevant to economic development; the development of a highly competitive and meritocratic academic labor market that rewarded research productivity; significant investment in overseas doctoral training, with deliberate strategies to attract graduates back to Korean universities; and the development of a small number of flagship research universities to world-class standards that served as anchors and exemplars for the rest of the system.

What the South Korean model also involved, and what is sometimes less acknowledged in comparative education discussions, is a level of political commitment to educational development that was sustained across multiple administrations and that involved the willingness to make significant sacrifices in other budget areas to fund educational investment. This political

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commitment was itself in part the product of specific historical circumstances, including the existential threat of North Korean military pressure, the strong Confucian cultural tradition that valorized education and scholarly achievement, and the determination of South Korea's post-war political leadership to make education the engine of national development.

Bangladesh shares the Confucian valorization of education, though expressed through Islamic and Bengali cultural forms rather than Confucian ones. What it has consistently lacked is the political commitment to sustained educational investment that transformed South Korean higher education. Understanding why this political commitment has been absent in Bangladesh, and how to build it, is perhaps the most important political economy question that this commentary poses.

11.2 The Indian Example: Reforms, IITs, and the Mixed Record

India's higher education system offers a more complex and ambivalent comparative perspective. India has built, in the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), and the Indian Institutes of Science (IISc and its sister institutions), a small cadre of genuinely world-class institutions that are recognized globally and that have produced graduates who have had an extraordinary impact on the global knowledge economy. But these islands of excellence exist within a vast sea of mediocre to poor quality higher education that serves the majority of India's higher education students.

The Indian model is therefore simultaneously an inspiring example of what is achievable and a cautionary tale about the dangers of a dual system in which excellence is concentrated in a small number of elite institutions while the majority of the system stagnates. Bangladesh, which already exhibits a version of this duality between its better universities and the mass of the National University and lower-tier private university system, would do well to learn from India's experience that building a few excellent institutions does not by itself transform a higher education system.

India's recent reforms in higher education, particularly the National Education Policy of 2020, which proposes a radical restructuring of the higher education system including a significant increase in research investment, the development of multidisciplinary universities, and a strong emphasis on digital and online education, offer potential lessons for Bangladesh. The NEP 2020's emphasis on multiple entry and exit points in higher education, on credit recognition and transfer between institutions, and on the development of vocational higher education as a mainstream option rather than a second-tier alternative, all represent ideas that Bangladesh could productively adapt to its own context.

11.3 The Finnish Paradox: Small System, Global Excellence

Finland's higher education system offers a different kind of comparative perspective, one that challenges the assumption that excellence in higher education is primarily a function of the size of the educational budget. Finland's universities produce world-class research in multiple disciplines and their graduates are among the most sought-after in Europe, yet Finland's total higher education budget is modest by the standards of comparable high-income countries, and

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the Finnish system is not characterized by the hyper-competitive, research-intensive culture of the American or British university systems.

The secret of Finnish higher education quality, to the extent that such secrets can be identified, lies less in the resources invested in universities than in the quality of the students who enter them and the culture of the institutions that receives them. Finnish students arrive at university after twelve years of high-quality, inquiry-based, teacher-led schooling that has genuinely developed their capacity to think, to question, and to take intellectual initiative. They enter universities that are characterized by a culture of academic seriousness, intellectual openness, and collegial respect. And they are taught by faculty who, while not necessarily the world's most prolific researchers, are genuinely committed to teaching and to the intellectual development of their students.

The Finnish example is a reminder that higher education quality is not simply a matter of money, though money is necessary. It is also, and perhaps primarily, a matter of culture: the culture of the schools that prepare students for university, the culture of the universities themselves, and the broader social culture that shapes what students and faculty expect of the higher educational experience. Transforming the culture of Bangladesh's universities, from a culture of credential acquisition and political positioning to a culture of genuine intellectual inquiry, is the deepest and in some ways the most difficult challenge that higher education reform in Bangladesh faces.

11.4 Learning from Vietnam: A Developing Country Comparator

Perhaps the most directly instructive comparative case for Bangladesh is Vietnam, a country with which Bangladesh shares several important characteristics: a recent history of conflict and national liberation struggle, a postcolonial educational system inherited from a period of foreign rule, a predominantly rural population, rapid economic development driven primarily by manufacturing exports, and a strong cultural commitment to education as a pathway to social mobility.

Vietnam's higher education reforms of the past two decades have produced results that Bangladesh would do well to study carefully. Starting from a position of chronic underfunding, political control, and low academic quality comparable to Bangladesh's current situation, Vietnam has made significant progress toward building a more research-oriented, internationally connected, and quality-focused higher education system. Key elements of Vietnam's reform include: the development of a small number of "national universities" to world-class research standards; the use of international partnerships, including significant cooperation with Japanese, Australian, and American universities, to build research capacity and develop faculty; the introduction of more rigorous quality assurance systems; and increased investment in STEM education to support Vietnam's economic development in higher-value manufacturing and technology sectors.

Vietnam's reform is not complete, and many of the problems that afflict Bangladesh's higher education system, including political interference in university governance, inadequate research funding, and a skills mismatch between educational outputs and labor market demands, are also present in Vietnam. But the direction and the pace of reform in Vietnam provide an example of

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what is achievable within a developing country context, when there is sufficient political will and a sufficiently coherent reform strategy.

Chapter Twelve: The Reform Agenda -- What Bangladesh's Higher Education Needs

12.1 The Political Moment and Its Possibilities

Bangladesh's higher education system stands at one of the most significant inflection points in its history. The political transition of August 2024, which brought the interim government to power under the leadership of Professor Muhammad Yunus following the mass uprising of students and citizens against the Hasina administration, created a political moment of unusual possibility for higher education reform. The uprising itself was, as we have noted throughout this commentary, in large part a product of the failures of the higher education system: the graduate unemployment crisis, the skills mismatch, the corruption of campus politics, and the destruction of academic quality through political patronage. The students who made the uprising were, in effect, demanding a different kind of education and a different kind of society, though they did not always express it in those terms.

The interim government has responded to this demand by establishing multiple reform commissions in various areas of governance and public life. As the search data notes, however, a dedicated commission for education reform was notably absent from the commission structure, a striking omission given the centrality of educational failure to the causes of the uprising. This absence reflects a deeper uncertainty about how to approach educational reform: education is a domain where every stakeholder, including political parties, religious organizations, private university owners, teacher unions, and parents, has strong interests that are difficult to reconcile, and the political cost of alienating any of these stakeholders may have made a dedicated reform commission seem too risky a political investment.

The search data also reveals that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), in anticipation of the national election scheduled for February 2026, has pledged comprehensive restructuring of the education sector if elected, including an increase in education funding to 5 percent of GDP. This pledge, if genuine and if sustained after the election, would represent the most significant commitment to educational investment in Bangladesh's history. But the history of educational reform promises in Bangladesh suggests considerable skepticism about the gap between electoral promise and implemented policy, and the structural obstacles to educational reform, including the political economy of patronage, the vested interests of educational entrepreneurs, and the cultural inertia of institutions resistant to change, will not be overcome by pledges alone.

12.2 A Ten-Point Reform Agenda for Higher Education

Drawing on the analysis developed throughout this Part, we can identify ten priority areas for higher education reform that are essential to the transformation of Bangladesh's higher education system from its current condition to one that serves the country's educational, economic, and democratic development needs.

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The first priority is the dramatic increase in public investment in higher education. The gap between Bangladesh's current level of educational investment, less than 2 percent of GDP for all education combined, and the international benchmark of 4 to 6 percent, is a gap that no amount of policy cleverness or institutional redesign can bridge without additional resources. The additional resources must come from two sources simultaneously: increased government budget allocation to education, which requires political decisions about taxation and expenditure priorities; and more efficient use of existing resources, which requires better governance and accountability systems within the educational sector itself.

The second priority is the reform of university governance to eliminate or severely reduce the political appointment of Vice-Chancellors and other senior university officials. This is the single most important structural reform needed to create the conditions for genuine academic quality. A constitutional or statutory mechanism for merit-based appointment of university leadership, through transparent processes involving academic peer review and independent assessment, would do more to improve the quality of Bangladesh's public universities than any other single institutional change.

The third priority is the development of a genuine national research strategy that identifies the scientific and scholarly domains in which Bangladesh can and should develop world-class research capacity, and that directs resources toward those domains with sufficient scale and persistence to actually build that capacity. A country of 170 million people cannot be excellent in everything, and a country with Bangladesh's resource constraints needs to be strategic about where it concentrates its research investment. The selection of strategic research priority areas should be driven by a combination of national development needs, existing academic strengths, and international opportunity.

The fourth priority is the transformation of doctoral education. The quality of Bangladesh's future academic workforce depends on the quality of the doctoral education that forms it. Building high-quality doctoral programs in Bangladesh's best universities requires: adequate research funding for doctoral students; competent supervisors who are themselves active researchers; functioning research infrastructure; and connections to the international scholarly community that prevent intellectual isolation. In the medium term, Bangladesh should also maintain and expand its support for overseas doctoral education, while developing more sophisticated mechanisms for attracting those graduates back to Bangladeshi universities.

The fifth priority is the root-and-branch reform of the National University, which serves millions of students through affiliated colleges and is currently performing far below its potential. The reform of the National University requires, at minimum: a systematic quality assessment of the 2,300-plus affiliated colleges, with closure or merger of those that cannot meet minimum standards; a comprehensive curriculum revision that incorporates the active learning, critical thinking, and digital literacy elements that current curricula lack; a restructuring of the examination system to assess genuine learning rather than mere memorization; and a teacher development program that brings the faculty of National University colleges up to the professional standards that their teaching responsibilities require.

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The sixth priority is the development of a genuinely equitable financing system for higher education, one that ensures that qualified students from all income levels can access quality higher education without being excluded by cost. This requires not simply the expansion of scholarships and bursaries for poor students within the existing system, but a rethinking of the financing architecture of higher education to ensure that public resources flow primarily to those students and institutions that serve the public interest rather than to those that serve the interests of the wealthy.

The seventh priority is the establishment of a truly independent, academically rigorous quality assurance and accreditation system. The proposed Bangladesh Higher Education Commission represents the most recent attempt to create such a system, and its success depends entirely on whether it is established with genuine independence from political interference, staffed by people of academic distinction and integrity, and given the regulatory authority and the enforcement capacity to act on its quality assessments without fear of political retribution.

The eighth priority is the development of a comprehensive policy framework for the digital transformation of higher education that addresses both the opportunities and the equity challenges of digital education. This framework must include: investment in digital infrastructure in educational institutions, including high-speed internet in all public universities and in National University colleges; development of high-quality digital learning content that is genuinely pedagogically superior to existing face-to-face teaching rather than merely a digital reproduction of it; policies on the educational use of artificial intelligence that are enabling rather than prohibitory; and equity measures that ensure that the benefits of digital education reach students regardless of their geographic location or economic background.

The ninth priority is the reform of the relationship between higher education and the labor market, not in the narrow sense of aligning curricula with current employer demands, which produces graduates who are trained for the jobs of today rather than equipped for the jobs of tomorrow, but in the broader sense of developing the capabilities that graduates need to be adaptable, creative, and productive contributors to a rapidly changing economy. This requires: the incorporation of generic professional skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and digital literacy, into all university programs; the development of stronger connections between universities and employers through internship programs, applied research partnerships, and employer engagement in curriculum design; and the development of a broader portfolio of post-secondary educational pathways that includes high-quality vocational and technical education as a genuine alternative to academic university education.

The tenth and in many ways the most fundamental priority is the reform of the culture of higher education, from a culture oriented toward credential acquisition, political positioning, and institutional survival, to a culture of genuine intellectual inquiry, professional integrity, and educational commitment. Cultural reform cannot be imposed by regulation or mandated by policy. It must emerge from the example of educational leadership that models and rewards genuine scholarship; from the development of academic communities of practice that sustain intellectual engagement and mutual accountability; from the teaching of critical thinking, academic integrity, and intellectual honesty as core values of the educational enterprise; and

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from the wider social valorization of genuine learning and academic integrity rather than the mere possession of academic credentials.

12.3 The Constitutional and Legal Framework for Reform

Comprehensive higher education reform in Bangladesh requires not only policy innovation and political will but also attention to the constitutional and legal framework within which the higher education system operates. Several specific legal and constitutional developments would strengthen the foundations of a transformed higher education system.

The first is the constitutional recognition of the right to quality higher education. While Article 17 of the Constitution recognizes the obligation of the state to provide free and compulsory education at the primary level, there is no comparable constitutional recognition of the state's obligations with respect to higher education. A constitutional amendment that recognized the state's obligation to maintain and develop a quality higher education system accessible to all qualified citizens regardless of economic background would strengthen the political and legal foundation for educational investment.

The second is the enactment of a comprehensive Private University Act that replaces the inadequate existing legislation with a framework that provides stronger quality assurance requirements, clearer governance standards, more robust consumer protection for students, and more effective enforcement mechanisms. The current Private University Act has proven inadequate to the challenge of regulating a sector that has expanded from 17 to over 113 institutions, many of them operating with minimal academic standards. A revised Act should establish minimum quality standards as conditions for the maintenance of degree-awarding status, require regular independent quality review, provide students with effective legal remedies against institutions that fail to deliver the education they promise, and establish clear and enforceable standards for the governance and financial transparency of private educational institutions.

The third is the development of an Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy Act that provides statutory protection for the academic freedom of university faculty members and for the institutional autonomy of universities from direct political control. Such legislation, modeled on academic freedom statutes in countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, would provide a legal foundation for challenging specific instances of government interference in academic affairs and would signal a national commitment to the values of free inquiry and intellectual independence that genuine higher education requires.

12.4 The Role of Academic Communities in Driving Reform

While the reform of higher education requires action by the government, the legislature, the regulatory bodies, and international development partners, it also requires, and indeed ultimately depends on, the active engagement of the academic communities of Bangladesh's universities themselves. Reform imposed from outside on academic communities that are passive, resistant, or captured by political patronage will not produce the cultural transformation that genuine higher education reform requires.

The development of genuine academic communities in Bangladesh's universities, communities defined by shared intellectual values, commitment to scholarly integrity, engagement with the international academic world, and collective responsibility for the quality of the educational experience they provide, is therefore a priority that is distinct from and in some ways prior to the institutional and policy reforms discussed above. Academic communities are built, not legislated. They develop through the accumulation of individual decisions by individual scholars to take their responsibilities seriously, to maintain their intellectual integrity, to mentor their students generously, and to engage with their colleagues in the spirit of collaborative inquiry rather than competitive positioning.

The examples of Bangladesh's most distinguished scholars, those who have maintained their academic integrity and intellectual vitality in the face of the institutional obstacles and political pressures that characterize the Bangladeshi higher education environment, are the most powerful argument that genuine academic community is possible in Bangladesh's universities. They deserve to be honored, supported, and followed, not simply celebrated.

Conclusion to Part Six: The University Bangladesh Deserves

The analysis of this Part has examined Bangladesh's higher education system across multiple dimensions: philosophical, historical, institutional, political-economic, qualitative, legal, and comparative. What emerges from this examination is a system of extraordinary contrasts and contradictions: a system that has expanded enormously in scale while failing to develop commensurately in quality; a system that claims to serve the nation's development needs while producing graduates who cannot find employment; a system that aspires to the production of knowledge while systematically underinvesting in research; a system that is supposed to cultivate democratic citizenship while being itself one of the most politically captured sectors of Bangladeshi public life.

These contradictions are not mysteries. They are the predictable products of identifiable historical forces: the colonial inheritance that created institutions designed for purposes other than genuine intellectual development; the political economy of patronage that transformed universities into instruments of political competition rather than centers of learning; the chronic underinvestment that deprives institutions of the resources they need to fulfill their educational mission; and the absence of the cultural and institutional conditions, including genuine academic freedom, meritocratic appointment, and a culture of intellectual inquiry, without which genuine higher education cannot flourish.

The contradictions are also not permanent. The experience of countries that have transformed their higher education systems from conditions comparable to Bangladesh's current situation demonstrates that transformation is possible, given sufficient political will, adequate resources, and sustained commitment across political transitions. Bangladesh has demonstrated, in other domains including public health, microcredit, and disaster management, the capacity for institutional innovation and program implementation that can produce dramatic improvements in

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outcomes in relatively short periods. The higher education system has the potential to demonstrate the same capacity, but it has not yet done so.

The students of Bangladesh have demonstrated, more powerfully than any policy document or academic commentary could, both the urgency of the need for higher education reform and the human capacity that the system is failing to develop. The courage, creativity, and collective commitment that the students of July 2024 displayed in confronting one of the most entrenched political systems in the country's history are precisely the capabilities that a genuinely excellent higher education system should develop. The tragedy is that those capabilities were developed in spite of, and in resistance to, the official educational system rather than through it.

Bangladesh deserves universities that are genuinely worthy of the aspirations of the young people who attend them: universities that are intellectually serious, academically excellent, democratically governed, financially transparent, professionally staffed, and genuinely committed to the dual vocation of the university in every society, the search for truth and the formation of citizens. The path to those universities is long, difficult, and politically contentious. But it begins with the recognition that what exists at present is not adequate to what the country needs and what the students deserve, and with the commitment to build something genuinely better.

Part Seven of this commentary will turn from higher education to one of the most complex and politically sensitive dimensions of Bangladesh's educational landscape: the examination system, its history, its psychology, its pathologies, and the comprehensive reform that it urgently requires. The examination system is not merely a technical matter of assessment design. It is the mechanism through which the educational system's deepest values and its most powerful social selections are made. Understanding it, in all its complexity, is essential to understanding both what is wrong with Bangladesh's education system and what a genuine transformation of that system would require.

Supplementary Analytical Commentary: The Rohingya Crisis and Higher Education

No commentary on higher education in Bangladesh can be complete without some attention to the higher education dimensions of the Rohingya refugee crisis, which represents one of the most significant and most neglected aspects of Bangladesh's educational challenge. The more than one million Rohingya refugees who have been living in the camps of Cox's Bazar since the mass displacement of 2017, with earlier waves going back decades, include a significant proportion of young people who are of university age and who, before the violence that drove them from Myanmar, had educational aspirations and in some cases educational backgrounds that equipped them for higher learning.

The Rohingya refugee crisis poses a profound philosophical and policy challenge for Bangladesh's higher education system. On one hand, access to higher education for Rohingya refugees is explicitly prohibited by Bangladesh's official policy, which restricts Rohingya access to education beyond the informal primary level in the camps, and which regards any expansion

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of educational opportunities for Rohingya as a potential obstacle to the policy goal of repatriation. On the other hand, the denial of higher educational opportunity to an entire generation of young people, for reasons entirely beyond their control, is a profound violation of the principle of educational justice that is central to any serious philosophical account of what education is for.

Several international organizations, including UNHCR, UNICEF, and various international NGOs, have attempted to provide some higher educational opportunities to Rohingya youth through online programs and distance learning initiatives. BRAC's education programs in the camps have provided primary and some secondary-level education to large numbers of Rohingya children. But the gap between the educational rights of Rohingya youth and the educational opportunities actually available to them remains enormous and deeply troubling.

The question of whether and how to provide higher educational opportunities to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is simultaneously a question of educational justice, a question of political economy, a question of international law, and a question of Bangladesh's own moral identity as a nation that has itself been the victim of the denial of educational rights and that has placed the protection of educational access at the center of its own national mythology. It is a question that deserves more serious engagement than it has yet received in Bangladesh's higher education policy debate.

Part Seven will examine the examination system of Bangladesh in comprehensive analytical depth, tracing its historical development, its philosophical foundations, its psychological effects on students and teachers, its social and economic functions, its most egregious pathologies, and the reform agenda that would transform it from its current role as a mechanism of social selection and psychological pressure into a genuine instrument of educational assessment and developmental feedback. The examination system is not separate from the educational system; it is the educational system's most powerful statement of what it values and what it expects, and reforming it is therefore inseparable from reforming everything else.

PART SEVEN: THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

Assessment, Accountability, Anxiety, and the Pathology of the Pass Rate

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Prologue to Part Seven: The Examination as the System's Mirror

There is a moment that repeats itself every year in Bangladesh, twice in the months of March and October, that reveals more about the country's education system than any policy document, any ministerial speech, or any academic study. It is the moment when the results of the Secondary School Certificate and the Higher Secondary Certificate examinations are published. In the hours

before publication, the country holds its breath. Millions of families wait, anxious, in homes from the char islands of the north to the fishing villages of the south. When the results become available, on websites, through SMS, through the notice boards of schools and colleges, the reaction is immediate and overwhelming: tears of relief and tears of grief; celebrations in households where children have passed; despair in households where they have not; and, somewhere in the midst of all this human drama, the cold arithmetic of percentages and GPAs being analyzed by education journalists, policy makers, and opinion formators who will spend the following weeks arguing about what the numbers mean.

What happened in October 2025 in this annual ritual was something genuinely remarkable, and it is the right place to begin a discussion of Bangladesh's examination system, because it crystallized in a single set of statistics a set of questions about the examination system that this Part will spend its considerable length examining. The HSC pass rate in October 2025 fell to 58.83 percent, the lowest in twenty-one years, since 2004 when the rate was 59.16 percent. Only 69,097 students achieved GPA-5, compared to 145,911 the previous year and the much higher numbers of the COVID-era examinations. The number of institutions recording a zero percent pass rate rose from 65 to 202. The number of institutions achieving 100 percent pass rates fell from 1,388 to 345.

The education adviser of the interim government, C.R. Abrar, responded to these results not with the usual bureaucratic defensiveness but with something approaching genuine candor. He said, as reported in Prothom Alo, that the pass rate and GPA-5 figures had surprised many, but that the answer to why they had fallen was not complex, only uncomfortable. The learning crisis in Bangladesh begins very early, at the primary level, and the gap widens year after year. New Age He added that for too long, a culture had been built in which numbers became the only truth, the pass rate was seen as success, and the number of GPA-5s as a measure of satisfaction, and that in attempting to make results look good, the country had unknowingly concealed the real learning crisis.

This statement is important not only for what it says but for when it was said. Every serious educational analyst in Bangladesh has been saying the same thing for at least two decades. What was different in October 2025 was that a senior government official was saying it in public, explicitly connecting the statistical drama of the examination results to the deeper crisis of learning quality that the examination system has, for years, been disguising rather than revealing. The 2025 HSC results did not reveal a new crisis. They removed a layer of statistical cosmetics from a crisis that has been present and growing for a generation.

This Part examines that crisis in its full depth, philosophical richness, historical complexity, and practical urgency. We begin with the philosophical question of what examinations are for, because the answer to this question determines everything else: what examinations should test, how they should be designed, what consequences should follow from their results, and how the pathologies of the existing examination system should be understood and addressed.

Chapter One: The Philosophy of Educational Assessment -- What Are Examinations For?

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1.1 The Multiple Purposes of Educational Assessment

Educational assessment, of which formal examinations are the most socially visible but by no means the only form, serves multiple purposes that are in considerable tension with one another. Understanding these purposes and their tensions is essential to understanding both the design of Bangladesh's examination system and the reasons why it fails to serve any of them well.

The first purpose of educational assessment is pedagogical: it provides information to teachers, students, and educational institutions about the degree to which learning is occurring, where it is succeeding and where it is failing, and what adjustments to teaching and learning strategies are needed. This is the purpose that educational psychologists and measurement theorists call "formative assessment," assessment that forms and improves the educational process. Formative assessment is continuous, qualitative, detailed, and oriented toward learning improvement. Its primary audience is the teacher and the student. Its primary product is not a grade or a rank but a diagnosis.

The second purpose is summative: it provides a formal record, at the end of a course or a phase of education, of what has been learned. This is the purpose that Bangladesh's public examinations, the PEC, JSC, SSC, and HSC, primarily serve in their official design. Summative assessment is terminal rather than continuous, quantitative rather than qualitative, and oriented toward the production of records that can be used by subsequent educational institutions, employers, and the individual herself to understand what the educational process has produced.

The third purpose is gatekeeping: it controls access to educational opportunities, employment, and social status. This is the most powerful purpose that Bangladesh's examination system serves in social practice, and it is the purpose that explains both the enormous social investment in examination performance and the enormous incentives for the pathological behaviors, cheating, grade inflation, and coaching center dependence, that characterize the examination system. When examination results determine who gains admission to the best universities, who is eligible for government employment, and who can lay claim to the social status of educational achievement, the examination ceases to be primarily an educational instrument and becomes primarily a sorting mechanism.

The fourth purpose, which is related to but distinct from the gatekeeping purpose, is what sociologists of education call the legitimation of social hierarchy: the examination provides a meritocratic narrative for the distribution of social positions and opportunities that might otherwise be experienced as merely the reproduction of existing privilege. The examination says, in effect: those who occupy the highest social positions do so on the basis of their demonstrated intellectual merit, not on the basis of their inherited social advantage. The examination is the principal instrument of what Bourdieu called the "misrecognition" of privilege as merit, the social mechanism by which the advantages of birth are converted into the advantages of attainment.

In Bangladesh, all four of these purposes are simultaneously present in the examination system, but they exist in a state of deep structural tension. The pedagogical purpose of assessment, formative and diagnostic, has virtually no presence in the formal public examination system,

which is entirely summative and provides no individualized feedback to students or teachers. The summative purpose of the examinations is compromised by the grade inflation that has characterized results since the COVID era and by the cheating and question paper leaks that undermine the reliability of the measurement. The gatekeeping purpose is served effectively, but through a mechanism that is so high-stakes, so anxiety-inducing, and so vulnerable to manipulation, that it causes enormous psychological damage and enormous social inefficiency. And the legitimation purpose is served so poorly that the system's pervasive corruption and the visible advantage it provides to those who can afford coaching centers and examination coaching have stripped it of much of its capacity to generate the social consensus around meritocracy that legitimation requires.

1.2 Classical Theories of Measurement and Their Educational Application

Before we can adequately evaluate Bangladesh's examination system, we need to engage with the technical and philosophical foundations of educational measurement, because these foundations determine what a valid and reliable examination looks like and how far Bangladesh's current examinations are from meeting these standards.

The classical theory of educational measurement, developed by educational psychologists from Alfred Binet and Charles Spearman at the beginning of the twentieth century through the major test theorists of the mid-century including Lee Cronbach and Frederic Lord, rests on several foundational concepts: validity, reliability, fairness, and utility.

Validity refers to the degree to which an examination measures what it claims to measure. A valid examination of critical thinking actually assesses the capacity to think critically; a valid examination of English language competence actually assesses the ability to communicate in English; a valid examination of scientific understanding actually assesses the understanding of scientific concepts and methods rather than the ability to memorize scientific facts. The question of whether Bangladesh's public examinations are valid, in this technical sense, is one to which the research evidence gives a largely negative answer. Studies of the cognitive demands of SSC and HSC examination papers consistently find that the vast majority of questions test recall of factual information rather than conceptual understanding, analytical reasoning, or problem-solving. An examination system that tests memorization rather than understanding is not valid as a measure of the capabilities that education is supposed to develop.

Reliability refers to the consistency of measurement: would the same student receive the same or similar results if the examination were administered on a different occasion, if her script were marked by a different examiner, or if she took a different version of the same examination? The reliability of Bangladesh's public examinations is seriously compromised by several factors: the inconsistency of marking standards across different examiners and examination centers; the discretionary awarding of grace marks that, as the HSC English examiner cited by bdnews24.com revealed, has been informally institutionalized rather than systematically regulated; and the vulnerability of the examination to question paper leaks that give some candidates unfair access to examination questions before the examination occurs.

Fairness refers to the degree to which the examination provides an equitable assessment of students' learning across different backgrounds, languages, abilities, and educational experiences. Bangladesh's examination system fails the fairness test in multiple ways: it systematically disadvantages students from rural areas who have less access to coaching centers; it disadvantages students from non-Bengali-speaking ethnic minority communities for whom the language of examination is not their primary language; it disadvantages students with disabilities for whom the standard examination format provides inadequate accommodation; and it disadvantages students from poor families who cannot afford the supplementary coaching that has become, in practice, a necessary condition of competitive examination performance.

Utility refers to the degree to which the information produced by the examination is useful for the purposes it serves. As a gatekeeping instrument, Bangladesh's examination system has some utility, but the reliability and validity problems mean that the gate it keeps is not very well aligned with the capabilities it is supposed to select for. The examination identifies students who are good at examination performance under Bangladesh's particular examination conditions, which is not the same as identifying students who are intellectually capable, creatively gifted, or likely to succeed in subsequent education or employment.

1.3 Item Response Theory and the Bangladeshi Context

The most sophisticated contemporary framework for educational measurement is Item Response Theory (IRT), which was developed by educational measurement theorists from the 1960s onward and has become the standard framework for the design and analysis of large-scale educational assessments in high-income countries. IRT provides a set of mathematical models for the relationship between a test-taker's ability and her probability of correctly answering each item in a test, allowing for more precise measurement of ability across the full range of the distribution than classical test theory permits.

IRT is not currently used in the design of Bangladesh's public examinations, which are based on much more rudimentary psychometric principles. The introduction of IRT-based examination design would, in principle, allow for more precise measurement of student capabilities, better identification of examination items that perform differently for students of different backgrounds (what measurement specialists call differential item functioning), and more accurate equating of examination forms across different years so that comparisons of results over time are statistically valid.

But the introduction of IRT is not a technical fix that can be applied to a fundamentally flawed examination system and make it functional. IRT is a tool for measuring more precisely what the examination is designed to measure; if the examination is designed to measure the wrong things, IRT will measure those wrong things more precisely. The deeper problem with Bangladesh's examination system is not the inadequacy of its measurement technology but the inadequacy of what it attempts to measure and the social functions it is required to serve.

1.4 Vygotsky, Zone of Proximal Development, and the Failure of Static Assessment

The Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) is most famous in educational discourse for his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): the zone between what a child can accomplish independently and what she can accomplish with the guidance and support of a more capable partner. For Vygotsky, learning happens most effectively in this zone: it is through supported engagement with tasks that are slightly beyond their current independent capacity that children develop new capabilities.

The relevance of the ZPD to educational assessment is immediate and profound, but largely ignored by Bangladesh's examination system. Static assessment, of the kind that Bangladesh's public examinations provide, measures what a student can accomplish independently at a single point in time under examination conditions. It does not measure the student's potential for development, her capacity to learn with support, or the width of her zone of proximal development. Two students with the same score on a static assessment may have very different ZPDs: one may be near the ceiling of her current developmental trajectory, while the other may be just beginning to enter a period of rapid growth. Static assessment cannot distinguish between these students; dynamic assessment, which is Vygotsky-inspired and involves assessing students' responsiveness to scaffolded instruction as well as their independent performance, can.

The implications of this for Bangladesh's examination system are significant. The examination system, as currently designed, does not and cannot measure what Vygotsky would regard as the most important educational outcome: the development of the student's capacity for independent learning and continuing intellectual growth. It measures instead a snapshot of performance that reflects not only the student's learning but her examination preparation, her emotional regulation under pressure, her access to supplementary tutoring, and the luck of which particular questions appear on the paper she faces.

A more Vygotskian approach to educational assessment would emphasize portfolio-based assessment that captures the development of student capabilities over time; project-based assessment that requires students to engage in extended, supported inquiry rather than demonstrating performance under artificial time pressure; and teacher assessment of classroom performance that reflects the day-to-day learning that examination hall performance systematically fails to capture. None of these forms of assessment are currently significant components of Bangladesh's public examination system, though the 2023 curriculum reform made some gestures toward their inclusion that have been, as we shall examine in detail, largely unsuccessful in implementation.

Chapter Two: The Architecture of Bangladesh's Examination System -- Design, History, and Administration

2.1 The Structure of Public Examinations

Bangladesh's formal public examination system is organized around four major examination milestones that punctuate the educational career of every student in the general education stream. These are the Primary Education Completion (PEC) examination at the end of class five; the

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Junior School Certificate (JSC) examination at the end of class eight; the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination at the end of class ten; and the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination at the end of class twelve.

In addition to these four examinations in the general stream, there are parallel examinations in the Madrasa stream: the Ibtedayi certificate at the primary level, the Junior Dakhil Certificate at the junior secondary level, the Dakhil certificate at the secondary level, and the Alim certificate at the higher secondary level. The technical and vocational stream has its own parallel examination structure. The result is a system of extraordinary examination density, in which students face multiple high-stakes public examinations over the course of their school career, each of which is organized and administered by one of nine regional boards of secondary and higher education plus the Madrasa Education Board and the Technical Education Board.

Above the school level, the university admission examinations add another layer of high-stakes assessment: each university, or in some cases each cluster of universities, conducts its own entrance examination, creating a secondary examination festival that occupies several months following the HSC results and requires students to travel across the country taking multiple separate tests. This examination proliferation is itself a significant educational problem, to which we will return.

The boards of intermediate and secondary education are the administrative entities responsible for conducting the SSC and HSC examinations. There are nine general boards, covering the Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong, Barisal, Sylhet, Jessore, Comilla, Dinajpur, and Mymensingh regions. The Dhaka board is by far the largest, typically accounting for the largest share of candidates in any given year. The boards are responsible for setting examination questions, printing question papers, organizing examination centers, recruiting and training examiners, marking scripts, and publishing results. They are essentially independent bureaucratic entities, connected to the Ministry of Education through the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), but operating with considerable day-to-day autonomy.

2.2 The Historical Development of the Examination System

The public examination system of Bangladesh is a direct inheritance of the colonial examination system developed by the British for the purpose of selecting the class of educated Indians who would serve in the colonial administration. As we noted in the historical chapters of this commentary, the competitive examination, as a mechanism for selecting educated elites for administrative positions, was one of the most important and most durable instruments of colonial educational governance.

The British competitive examination was itself modeled on the Chinese imperial examination system, the Keju, which had been in existence in various forms since the Han dynasty and had reached its classical form under the Tang and Song dynasties. The Chinese Keju, which lasted in its imperial form until 1905, was a system of rigorous literary and philosophical examinations organized around the Confucian classics, through which the Chinese imperial bureaucracy was staffed by men of demonstrated scholarly attainment regardless of their social origin. The British, impressed by this system when they encountered it through Jesuit missionaries and later

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through their own observations, adapted its competitive principle to the selection of the Indian Civil Service.

The examination system that was imported into Bengal was therefore, from its inception, primarily a selection device rather than a learning assessment. It was designed not to measure what students had learned, in any broad sense, but to identify the most capable candidates for a limited number of available positions. This selection function has remained the primary social function of Bangladesh's public examination system, despite the enormous expansion of the examination population from the few thousand candidates of the colonial era to the more than a million candidates who sit the SSC and HSC examinations each year.

The formal structure of the examination system has changed significantly since the colonial period. The colonial examinations were conducted primarily in English and tested primarily the ability to demonstrate command of the English language and of English literary and administrative culture. The post-independence examinations have been progressively Bengalized, with Bengali as the primary medium of instruction and examination, and with a curriculum that reflects an attempt, however imperfect, to incorporate Bengali cultural content alongside the Western academic disciplines. The introduction of the multiple-choice question format, the GPA grading system, and the examination boards as the primary administrative entities are all post-colonial developments.

What has not changed is the fundamental orientation of the examination system toward selection rather than learning assessment, toward the production of hierarchically ordered results rather than the provision of pedagogically useful feedback, and toward the high-stakes individual competition that produces the pathological social psychology of examination preparation that we will examine in detail in subsequent chapters.

2.3 The GPA System and the Era of Grade Inflation

The introduction of the Grade Point Average (GPA) system in Bangladesh's secondary examinations in 2001 was presented as a modernization of the assessment system, a replacement of the old letter-grade and division system with a more precise and more internationally recognized measurement framework. In principle, the GPA system allowed for more fine-grained differentiation of student performance and provided a more comparable measure of achievement across different examination boards and different years.

In practice, the GPA system was implemented in a political and institutional context that transformed it from a measurement tool into a political instrument. The dramatic increase in GPA-5 recipients over the years following the system's introduction reflects not, in most cases, a genuine improvement in student learning, but a complex of incentives and pressures that caused the examination system to produce increasingly inflated results. Education ministers and governments have an obvious political interest in examination results that show improvement: higher pass rates and higher GPA-5 numbers are reported in the press as evidence of educational progress and government success. Examination boards have an interest in producing results that satisfy the political demand for improvement. Examiners have an interest, sometimes financially incentivized and sometimes informally pressured, in marking generously.

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The extraordinary swing in HSC results between the COVID pandemic years and 2025 tells this story with brutal statistical clarity. In 2021, the HSC exam was held on a few subjects with an abbreviated syllabus, and the pass rate was 95.26 percent, with 189,169 students achieving GPA-5. RSIS International By 2025, on a full syllabus with rigorous marking, the pass rate had fallen to 58.83 percent and GPA-5 recipients to 69,097. The difference between the 2021 figure of 189,169 GPA-5 recipients and the 2025 figure of 69,097 is not a reflection of a genuine fall in the intellectual quality of Bangladeshi students over four years. It is a reflection of the enormous gap between the inflated results produced by an examination system operating under political pressure for good numbers, and the more realistic results produced by an examination system that, at least partially and for at least one year, attempted to apply genuine academic standards.

The education adviser's response to the 2025 results, acknowledging that the previous culture of making results look good had concealed the real learning crisis, was an implicit acknowledgment of a truth that Bangladesh's educational establishment has long preferred not to confront openly: the examination results of the past decade have been, in significant measure, a statistical fiction. They have reported high achievement where there was, in many cases, minimal learning; they have reported competence where there was, in many cases, a capacity primarily for examination performance under the specific conditions of Bangladesh's particular examination system.

2.4 Administrative Structure and Its Weaknesses

The administrative structure of Bangladesh's public examination system is both complex and fragile, and its complexity and fragility are among the principal reasons why it is so vulnerable to the pathologies that we will examine in subsequent chapters.

Each examination involves thousands of examination centers distributed across the country, each supervised by a center secretary and a team of invigilators drawn from the teaching staff of schools and colleges in the area. The logistical challenge of distributing question papers to thousands of centers simultaneously, maintaining the security of the papers during transportation and before the examination begins, and ensuring that invigilators actually enforce examination rules rather than permitting or facilitating cheating, is enormous. The administrative capacity available to the boards to meet this challenge is, by any reasonable assessment, inadequate.

The process of setting examination questions is another significant administrative weakness. As the expert Siddiqur Rahman observed in his interview with The Daily Star, the people responsible for preparing question papers have limited expertise. Europe-solidaire In many countries, examination specialists are specifically appointed to education boards for this purpose; Bangladesh does not rigorously follow this practice. The result is examination papers that vary significantly in quality across boards and across years, that frequently fail to align with the stated learning objectives of the curriculum, and that tend, as a default, toward the testing of factual recall because this type of question is technically easier to set reliably.

The process of marking examination scripts is a further administrative challenge. The volume of scripts produced by a million-plus candidate examination is enormous, and the marking must be completed within a tight time frame if results are to be published within the expected sixty days. This requires the recruitment of large numbers of examiners who have been trained to apply

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consistent marking standards. The evidence suggests that marking consistency is a chronic problem: different examiners apply different standards to the same work, grace marks are applied inconsistently, and the moderation processes that should identify and correct marking inconsistencies are inadequate. The consequence is that the GPA a student receives on her examination script is, in significant part, determined by the luck of which examiner marks her script rather than by the quality of her work.

Chapter Three: The Question Paper Leak -- An Epidemic with Deep Roots

3.1 The Scale and History of the Leak Problem

Bangladesh's examination system has been plagued by question paper leaks for as long as the system has existed in its modern form. According to the Bangladesh government, the first recorded question leaks in public exams date back to 1979 during SSC exams. Apqn Since then, the problem has grown from an occasional and episodic failure of examination security into what educational experts have described as an epidemic that has infected virtually every level of the examination system, from primary school annual examinations through the SSC and HSC, university entrance examinations, and public service recruitment tests.

The scale and systematization of the leak problem reached its most dramatic point in the years between 2014 and 2018, when multiple SSC and HSC examination papers were leaked before the examination dates, sometimes hours before the examination began, and distributed through social media platforms, coaching centers, and informal networks to students who had the connections or the money to obtain them. During the 2014 HSC examination period, the English exam schedule of Dhaka Board was changed due to leaks. Bonikbarta In the same period, allegations of medical and dental entrance test question paper leaks were confirmed by inquiry teams, but the response of the government was denial and political defensiveness rather than genuine corrective action.

The institutional and criminal networks through which question papers are leaked have been documented in considerable detail by investigative journalists and by the Anti-Corruption Commission. In the last five to six years, an organized question paper leak gang struck numerous deals with job and admission seekers in exchange of hefty sums, and helped many to cheat their way into universities and jobs. Bonikbarta The Anti-Corruption Commission found 18 critical and risky steps in the process of preparing and distributing a question paper that could result in a leak, from the initial setting of questions through the printing process at the Bangladesh Government Press (BG Press) to the transportation and distribution to examination centers.

The criminal networks involved in question paper leaks are sophisticated and well-organized. It is like a one-stop shop where subject experts solve questions and supply those to jobseekers and university admission candidates directly at the examination halls using electronic devices. Bonikbarta The use of electronic devices, including smartphones with hidden earpieces and smartwatches capable of displaying text messages, has added a technological dimension to

examination cheating that goes beyond the traditional paper-based methods of smuggled notes and copying from neighbors.

3.2 The Legal Framework: Laws, Enforcement, and Their Limits

Bangladesh has had legislation against examination malpractice since 1980. The current framework is the Public Examinations (Offences) (Amended) Act of 1992, which provides for maximum penalties of three to ten years imprisonment for those convicted of leaking examination questions, falsifying marks, or engaging in other forms of examination fraud. Bangladeshi school children as young as 14 caught cheating in final exams can in future be jailed for up to 10 years under a law approved by their parliament. Any teacher found guilty of leaking examination questions, falsifying marks or diploma certificates faces the same penalty. The Daily Star

The gap between the legal penalties and the actual enforcement of those penalties has been one of the primary reasons why the leak problem has persisted and grown despite successive legislative interventions. Many feel that the law related to the punishment of the perpetrators for such crime is not that much stringent, and this encourages an unabated rise in such incidents. Wikipedia This perception of inadequate consequences reflects not so much the inadequacy of the legal penalties on paper but the inadequacy of enforcement in practice: arrests have been made, cases have been filed, and some convictions have been obtained, but the pattern of enforcement has been inconsistent, politically selective, and unable to deter the large-scale organized networks that profit from examination fraud.

The political dimension of enforcement failure cannot be ignored. The most significant question paper leaks have occurred during periods when the political leadership had strong incentives to suppress negative publicity about the examination system. A vigorous investigation of a major examination leak risks public exposure of the systemic failures that allowed the leak to occur, which is politically damaging to whichever government is in power. The incentive to deny leaks, to minimize their scope, and to treat enforcement as a public relations problem rather than a genuine criminal justice priority, has been present across multiple governments and has consistently compromised the integrity of the legal response.

3.3 The Sociology of Cheating: Why It Happens and Who It Serves

The phenomenon of examination cheating in Bangladesh cannot be adequately understood purely as a problem of individual moral failure or criminal opportunism. It is a social phenomenon with deep structural roots in the specific characteristics of Bangladesh's educational system and the broader social context within which that system operates.

The primary structural root is the extreme high-stakes nature of the examination system. When some pupils are unfairly advantaged within the system, others are likely to become de-motivated to work hard. Rather than working hard, they tend to invest their time in planning the strategies they can apply to cheat in the examination. Ugc When the entire trajectory of a young person's educational and professional life is determined by her performance in a handful of examinations taken over a few days, the temptation to obtain any possible advantage, by any means available,

is enormous. A family that has invested years of sacrifice in a child's education, a child who understands that her future depends on her examination results, a social environment in which examination success is the primary marker of individual worth and family honor: in this context, the social pressure toward examination fraud is not simply a reflection of individual moral weakness but of a social system that has made the examination the single most important event in millions of young lives.

The second structural root is the coaching center industry, which both reflects and reinforces the examination orientation of the educational system. Coaching centers are private enterprises that offer, for fees, intensive preparation for public examinations. They have proliferated across Bangladesh and have become, in many families' understanding, a necessary supplement to schooling that is itself increasingly experienced as inadequate preparation for examination success. The coaching center industry creates a market for examination intelligence, including leaked questions and model answers for likely examination items, that provides one of the primary channels through which examination fraud is commercialized. The coaching center that provides leaked examination questions is serving its clients' perceived needs efficiently and ruthlessly, in a context where the social pressure for examination success has been allowed to overwhelm other educational values.

The third structural root is the failure of legitimate educational provision to develop the capabilities that examinations purport to measure. Students who have spent twelve years in a system that has required them to memorize rather than understand, that has provided them with textbooks rather than education, and that has given them examination coaching rather than genuine intellectual development, often find themselves sitting examination papers that they cannot answer on the basis of genuine knowledge. The cheating that results from this situation is, in a profound sense, the product of the system itself: it is the rational response of students who have been told to prepare for examinations rather than to learn, discovering that the examination requires them to demonstrate knowledge they have not actually acquired.

3.4 The International Context: Comparative Perspectives on Examination Fraud

Bangladesh's examination fraud problem is severe, but it is not unique. In 2013, South Korea cancelled its scheduled SAT exams nationwide after discovering that questions from upcoming tests had been leaked. The leak was linked to private tutoring centers. The Daily Star India has experienced repeated and dramatic examination leaks, particularly in state-level public service examinations and in the nationally important Joint Entrance Examination for IIT admission. The United States has seen large-scale cheating scandals including the 2019 Operation Varsity Blues affair in which wealthy parents paid to fraudulently manipulate their children's college admission prospects.

What distinguishes Bangladesh's situation from most high-income country comparators is the degree to which examination fraud has become normalized, widespread, and in some respects institutionalized within the examination administration itself, rather than being an exceptional violation of a generally functioning system. When examiners routinely award grace marks without formal authorization, when political pressure is regularly applied to produce results that look good rather than results that are accurate, when the denial of leaked questions is the

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standard initial official response regardless of the evidence, the problem is not simply one of individual criminality but of systemic corruption that has penetrated the institutions responsible for examination integrity.

The comparison with India's Bihar state, where examination fraud has been so pervasive and so well-documented that it has become internationally notorious, is instructive. The repeated leaks in the Bihar School Examination Board exams over the years have often been attributed to poor management and infrastructure, including instances where question papers were sold openly before the exams. The Daily Star Bangladesh's examination system has not quite reached the level of public dysfunction documented in Bihar, but the structural conditions that produced Bihar's examination catastrophe, including political capture of examination administration, inadequate security infrastructure, and the normalization of fraud as a social practice, are present in Bangladesh to a significant degree.

Chapter Four: The Coaching Center Complex -- Shadow Education and Its Consequences

4.1 The Shadow Education System

One of the most important and least analytically engaged phenomena in Bangladesh's educational landscape is what comparative education researchers call "shadow education": the private, fee-based supplementary educational activities that exist alongside the formal school system and that are oriented primarily toward improving performance in public examinations. In Bangladesh, shadow education takes several forms: private tutoring by individual teachers, coaching centers that prepare students for specific examinations, and the informal system of teachers providing private coaching to their own students outside school hours, which creates a conflict of interest between teachers' formal educational responsibilities and their informal income-generating activities.

The scale of shadow education in Bangladesh is enormous. Survey data consistently finds that large majorities of students in the upper grades of secondary school and at the HSC level attend coaching centers or receive private tutoring. In urban areas, the proportion is higher still, and the competitive pressure for coaching that characterizes secondary education in Dhaka, Chittagong, and other major cities rivals the coaching cultures of South Korea and Japan, which are themselves internationally famous for the intensity of their examination preparation regimes.

The coaching center industry has developed because a genuine market need exists: the formal school system, with its large class sizes, poorly trained teachers, inadequate resources, and examination-focused pedagogy, does not adequately prepare most students for competitive examination performance. Coaching centers fill this gap by providing more intensive examination preparation, smaller group sizes, practice on past papers, and sometimes more engaging and capable instruction than the formal school provides.

But the coaching center industry also creates and perpetuates the need it claims to serve. By demonstrating consistently that students who attend coaching do better in examinations than

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those who do not, coaching centers create pressure on families across all income levels to invest in coaching, regardless of whether they can afford it. The result is a massive transfer of household income to the coaching industry, with the families that can least afford it often making the greatest proportional sacrifices to keep their children in coaching. The estimate that the coaching center industry in Bangladesh has an annual turnover of several thousand crore taka understates the total household expenditure on shadow education when private tutoring and other informal arrangements are included.

4.2 The Conflict of Interest Problem

The most ethically troubling aspect of the shadow education system in Bangladesh is the conflict of interest created when teachers provide private coaching to their own students. The incentive structure is straightforward and perverse: a teacher who deliberately under-teaches in the formal classroom creates demand for private coaching from her students, which she can then supply for additional fees. The student who does not engage a teacher for private coaching may find herself disadvantaged in the classroom, through less individual attention, less encouragement, and in extreme cases, through biased assessment.

This conflict of interest has been documented extensively and is widely acknowledged as a significant problem, but it has proved extraordinarily resistant to policy intervention. Successive governments have periodically announced bans on teachers providing private coaching to their own students, and these bans have been approximately as effective as Prohibition was in the United States: they have driven the practice underground without eliminating it. The reason for this resistance is not simply individual teacher venality. It is structural: teacher salaries in Bangladesh are too low, particularly in the non-government schools and colleges that serve the majority of students, to provide an adequate income without supplementary coaching income. Until the structural conditions that make supplementary coaching economically necessary for teachers are changed, the conflict of interest will persist.

4.3 Coaching, Equity, and the Reproduction of Advantage

The coaching center complex has profound implications for educational equity that go far beyond the individual financial burden that it places on families. It creates a systematic structural advantage for students from wealthier families, who can afford both more hours of coaching and more experienced and effective coaches. The student who attends a top coaching center in Dhaka's Motijheel or Mirpur neighborhood, with experienced teachers who know the examination system intimately, model answer sheets for the past decade's papers, and peer groups of similarly motivated and similarly coached students, has a substantial advantage in examination performance over the student who attends no coaching or attends a cheap and crowded coaching center in a district town.

This coaching-mediated advantage is not reflected in the formal assessment of student ability. When examination results are used for university admission or scholarship allocation, the student who has benefited from extensive coaching appears in the data on exactly the same terms as the student who achieved the same result without coaching. The examination result is presented as a measure of individual merit, but it is significantly a measure of access to coaching resources that

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are distributed according to family wealth. This is Bourdieu's reproduction mechanism at work in its most naked form: the advantages of economic capital are converted, through the coaching market, into the academic capital of examination results, which is then converted into the social capital of educational credentials and social position.

The equity implications of the coaching complex are particularly damaging in the context of the university admission examination system. Students who have spent a year in intensive coaching preparation for university entrance examinations have an enormous advantage over students who have not, and this advantage is particularly significant in the competitive admission examinations for the most prestigious universities, where the differences between admitted and rejected candidates may be measured in fractions of marks. The result is that elite university admission, rather than being a meritocratic selection on the basis of intellectual potential, is in significant measure a selection on the basis of capacity to invest in examination preparation.

Chapter Five: The Psychological Dimensions of the Examination Culture

5.1 Examination Anxiety and Its Effects

Educational psychology has produced a substantial body of research on examination anxiety, its causes, its psychological mechanisms, and its effects on examination performance and on student wellbeing. This research is particularly relevant to Bangladesh, where the high-stakes examination culture creates conditions that are almost ideally suited to the production of chronic examination anxiety in a large proportion of the student population.

Examination anxiety is not simply a form of ordinary nervousness that is an inevitable accompaniment to any high-stakes performance situation. It is a specific psychological syndrome characterized by cognitive interference with task performance, physiological symptoms including racing heart, sweating, and gastrointestinal distress, and behavioral avoidance or performance-disruption. Students who suffer from high levels of examination anxiety typically perform below their actual competence level in examination situations, because the cognitive resources that anxiety consumes are precisely the cognitive resources, working memory capacity, attentional control, and information processing efficiency, that examination performance requires.

The research on examination anxiety in the South Asian context, including several studies conducted specifically in Bangladesh, finds consistently high rates of significant examination anxiety among secondary school students, with rates particularly elevated among girls, among students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, among students who have previously failed an examination, and among students in the period immediately before the SSC and HSC examinations. The social and family pressure that accompanies these examinations, the knowledge that failure carries enormous consequences for the student's future and for the honor and aspirations of her family, is a powerful amplifier of examination anxiety that the individual student cannot easily manage independently.

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The consequences of chronic examination anxiety are not limited to examination performance. The months of intensive examination preparation that precede the SSC and HSC create conditions of what psychologists call chronic stress, with documented effects on sleep quality, physical health, mood, and social relationships. The suicide rate among students in the period immediately following major examination results, when those who have failed or performed below expectations face the catastrophic collapse of their aspirations and the anguish of family disappointment, is a measure of the psychological damage that the examination system can inflict on vulnerable young people.

5.2 Learned Helplessness and the Banking Model

Martin Seligman's concept of learned helplessness, developed from experiments with animals exposed to uncontrollable aversive stimuli and subsequently generalized to human psychology, describes a state in which an organism that has experienced repeated failures to control outcomes through its own actions comes to believe that it has no control over what happens to it, and consequently reduces its effort and engagement in all domains. The relationship between learned helplessness and Bangladesh's examination culture is not immediately obvious but is, on reflection, significant.

Students who repeatedly experience examination failure, or who see their examination performance as primarily determined by factors outside their control, including whether they have access to the right coaching, whether their examination paper is marked generously or harshly, whether question papers are leaked to some students but not to them, are precisely the students who are most likely to develop learned helplessness. The randomness and perceived unfairness of examination outcomes, in a system where performance depends heavily on factors other than the student's own genuine learning and ability, creates conditions that are conducive to helplessness-inducing experiences.

The connection to Freire's banking model of education is also direct. A student who has spent twelve years in classrooms where the primary educational activity is the passive reception of information deposited by the teacher, where her own active engagement with knowledge is neither expected nor rewarded, and where the measure of educational success is the faithful reproduction of received information in an examination, has been formed by an educational process that is, in Freire's terms, deeply dehumanizing. She has learned to be a passive recipient of knowledge rather than an active producer of understanding. And then she is placed in an examination hall and asked to demonstrate, under extreme pressure, capabilities that the educational process has systematically failed to develop.

5.3 The Psychology of Grade Inflation and Expectation Management

The phenomenon of grade inflation, which we examined in its administrative and political dimensions in Chapter Two, also has significant psychological dimensions that are worth examining separately. When pass rates are artificially inflated, as they were consistently in the decade before 2025, the students who receive inflated grades are given a false picture of their academic capabilities. They graduate from secondary school believing themselves to be competent in areas where they are, in reality, barely literate. They enter higher education or the

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labor market with expectations about their own competence that are regularly and painfully disconfirmed.

The psychological consequence of this expectation mismatch is predictable and has been documented in Bangladesh's labor market: a graduate unemployment crisis that is experienced not merely as an economic problem but as a profound personal failure. Young people who have done everything that the educational system asked of them, who have passed their examinations and obtained their certificates, who have been told by their results that they are capable and qualified, discover when they face the labor market or the university entrance examination that their results were misleading. This experience of disconfirmation is psychologically devastating, and it contributes to the social anger and political alienation that found expression in the July 2024 uprising.

The 2025 HSC results, with their sharp fall in pass rates and GPA-5 numbers, represent the painful beginning of a process of honest reckoning with the true state of student learning that the inflated results of previous years had concealed. The education adviser's frank acknowledgment that the previous culture of good-looking results had concealed the real learning crisis was an important step in this reckoning. But the reckoning must go much further than a statistical correction to be genuinely productive. It must include a serious engagement with the pedagogical question of why so many students are failing to learn what the curriculum says they should learn, and with the assessment question of how to design examinations that measure genuine learning rather than examination performance.

5.4 Self-Determination Theory and the Motivation Crisis

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan over several decades of empirical research, provides one of the most powerful frameworks for understanding the motivational dynamics of Bangladesh's examination system. SDT holds that human beings have three fundamental psychological needs that must be met for genuine motivation and wellbeing: the need for autonomy, the sense that one is the origin of one's own actions; the need for competence, the sense that one can accomplish meaningful challenges; and the need for relatedness, the sense of genuine connection to others.

SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, engagement with an activity for its own sake because it is interesting, enjoyable, or meaningful, and extrinsic motivation, engagement with an activity in order to obtain external rewards or avoid external punishments. Research consistently finds that intrinsic motivation supports deeper learning, greater creativity, better retention, and higher psychological wellbeing than extrinsic motivation, which tends to support surface learning, conformist behavior, and poorer wellbeing.

Bangladesh's examination culture is almost perfectly designed, from the perspective of SDT, to undermine intrinsic motivation and to substitute a form of extrinsic motivation, the desire to pass examinations and avoid the social shame of failure, that is both psychologically costly and educationally counterproductive. The examination-focused classroom systematically violates the autonomy need by making students passive recipients of examination preparation rather than active agents of their own learning. It violates the competence need by creating a system of

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arbitrary rewards and punishments, through grade inflation and examination fraud, in which the relationship between genuine competence and examination outcome is unreliable. And it violates the relatedness need by organizing educational experience around individual competitive performance rather than collaborative learning and intellectual community.

Chapter Six: The Curriculum-Examination Relationship -- When Assessment Drives Learning

6.1 The Backwash Effect

Educational researchers use the term "backwash" or "washback" to describe the effect that assessment systems have on the educational process that precedes them. The backwash effect is a general phenomenon: when students and teachers know that specific forms of assessment will occur, they adjust their learning and teaching activities to prepare for those forms of assessment. Backwash can be positive, when the assessment requires the kinds of intellectual activity that are genuinely valuable and therefore pulls the curriculum toward valuable learning; or negative, when the assessment rewards activities that are not genuinely valuable, pulling the curriculum away from genuine education toward examination training.

The backwash of Bangladesh's public examination system on the teaching and learning that precedes it is overwhelmingly negative. Because the examinations primarily test factual recall, the classroom culture that prepares students for the examinations primarily emphasizes memorization. Because the examinations are structured around a fixed and predictable syllabus with predictable question formats, the coaching center culture that supplements classroom preparation is oriented toward the systematic coverage of the syllabus and the mastery of examination techniques rather than toward genuine understanding. Because examination performance determines everything while classroom engagement determines nothing, students learn to manage their time and energy to maximize examination performance rather than genuine learning: attending coaching centers, practicing past papers, and memorizing model answers rather than reading widely, asking questions, or engaging in the exploratory intellectual activity that genuine learning requires.

The result is a curriculum-examination relationship that is almost exactly the reverse of what educational research says it should be. Instead of the assessment measuring the learning that the curriculum promotes, the examination drives the teaching and learning away from what the curriculum intends and toward what the examination rewards. The intended curriculum, the curriculum that exists in the official documents and the aspirations of curriculum designers, is very different from the implemented curriculum, the curriculum that is actually experienced by students in classrooms, and this difference is primarily explained by the backwash of the examination system.

6.2 The 2023 Curriculum Reform and Its Examination Implications

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The 2023 curriculum reform, which we examined in detail in earlier parts of this commentary, represents the most ambitious attempt to break the negative backwash of the examination system in Bangladesh's educational history. The new curriculum is organized around competencies rather than content, it emphasizes active learning and problem-solving over passive reception and memorization, and it incorporates a mixed assessment model that includes school-based formative assessment alongside the traditional public examinations.

The examination implications of the new curriculum were, from the beginning, one of the most contentious and most challenging aspects of implementation. If the curriculum is organized around competencies, the examination must also assess competencies rather than factual recall; if the curriculum emphasizes active learning, the examination must somehow assess the outcomes of active learning rather than the outcomes of passive reception; if the curriculum incorporates school-based assessment, the school-based assessment must be implemented with sufficient rigor and consistency to have credibility as a component of the summative record.

None of these implications have been adequately worked out in practice. The curriculum we have today is essentially a refurbished version of the 2012 framework. There are a few issues with the existing curriculum, and one of them is the massive gap between the prescribed version and the implemented version. Europe-solidaire The school-based assessment component of the new curriculum has been implemented with extreme inconsistency across different schools and different teachers: some schools have implemented it seriously, using it as a genuine tool of formative assessment and student feedback; others have treated it as a bureaucratic requirement to be met by assigning and grading a required number of assessment tasks without any serious engagement with their educational purpose.

The examination component of the new curriculum's assessment system remains, in its fundamental structure, the traditional public examination, with the traditional emphasis on written responses to predetermined questions in an examination hall under time pressure. The question papers that have been produced under the new curriculum framework have attempted to move toward more competency-based assessment, requiring some integration of knowledge across subject areas and some application of learning to novel situations. But the design of genuinely competency-based examinations at scale, with sufficient validity, reliability, and fairness to serve as a basis for the selection decisions that Bangladesh's examination system is required to make, is technically and logistically extremely demanding, and the Bangladesh examination system does not currently have the technical or institutional capacity to do it adequately.

6.3 The English Language Examination Problem

Among the most acute and most consequential of the specific examination problems in Bangladesh is the state of English language assessment. English is a required subject in the SSC and HSC curricula, and English examination performance is a component of the GPA that determines university admission and scholarship eligibility. Yet a significant number of students failed in English and in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which affected the overall HSC 2025 outcome heavily. New Age And the long-term record of English language education in Bangladesh is, as noted by the Business Standard, deeply troubling: a university

graduate, despite more than a decade of mandatory English in their curriculum, may still struggle to hold a simple conversation in English.

The gap between the formal requirement of English language education and the actual development of English language competence is one of the most vivid illustrations of the curriculum-examination gap that characterizes Bangladesh's education system. Students in Bangladesh's schools are, on paper, studying English from class one through class twelve, a period of twelve years of English language instruction that should, if genuinely effective, produce functional bilingual competence. In practice, English language instruction in most Bangladeshi schools consists primarily of reading and translating texts, memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary lists, and practicing the specific question formats of the English examination. It does not systematically develop speaking, listening, reading for meaning, or writing for communication.

The result is a form of examination English that has almost no relationship to functional English language competence. Students learn to perform on English examinations without developing the capacity to use English as a language of thought or communication. This is perhaps the most extreme example of negative backwash in the entire Bangladeshi education system, and its consequences are felt most painfully in the labor market, where English language competence is an important requirement for employment in the growing sectors of the economy but where most graduates lack the genuine English competence that their examination records suggest they should possess.

Chapter Seven: University Admission Examinations -- The Second Tournament

7.1 The Architecture of University Admission

The university admission examination system in Bangladesh is a second high-stakes examination tournament that follows immediately upon the HSC examination. Students who have spent two years preparing for the HSC must then spend additional months preparing for a separate round of competitive entrance examinations for universities, creating a continuous examination ordeal that occupies much of a young person's late adolescence.

The absence of a unified university admission examination, comparable to China's Gaokao or South Korea's CSAT, means that students who wish to maximize their chances of admission to a good university must sit multiple separate examinations at multiple separate institutions. A student aiming at a science program might sit the admission tests of Dhaka University, BUET, Jahangirnagar University, Rajshahi University, and several private universities, traveling to different cities and managing different examination formats and preparation requirements for each. Their entire business model is built on preparing students for a labyrinth of different university tests. A single, transparent ranking system derived from school examinations would render much of their expensive, specialised coaching obsolete overnight. South Asia Journal

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This fragmented admission system is costly for students and families, both financially and in terms of the time and stress that the admission examination tournament imposes. It is also allocatively inefficient: the enormous social energy devoted to university admission examination preparation is energy that is not devoted to the genuine intellectual development that university education is supposed to build on.

7.2 The Case for a Unified National University Admission Test

The argument for a unified national university admission test, one that all universities accept as the basis for admission decisions, is both intellectually compelling and practically controversial. The intellectual case is straightforward: a unified test, properly designed, calibrated, and implemented, would be more efficient than the current system of multiple separate tests, more equitable in its distribution of preparation burden, more valid in its measurement of the capabilities relevant to university study, and more transparent in its connection between secondary school performance and university admission eligibility.

Several models from other countries provide potential templates for a Bangladeshi unified admission test. The Chinese Gaokao is the most extreme example of a unified national examination that serves as the virtually sole determinant of university admission across the entire university system, with the merits and demerits that flow from such concentration of social stakes in a single examination. South Korea's CSAT is a more technically sophisticated version of a similar model, incorporating multiple subject areas and providing a more differentiated profile of student capabilities across different domains. The American SAT and ACT are not admission examinations in the strict sense, as American universities use them as one component of a holistic admission process that also incorporates grades, essays, recommendations, and extracurricular activities.

For Bangladesh, the most relevant model might be a modified version of the South Korean approach: a single, well-designed national examination that covers the core subject areas of the HSC curriculum, administered on a common date to all candidates, with results expressed as a detailed profile of performance across different subject areas rather than as a single aggregate score. This examination could replace the multitude of separate university admission tests, dramatically reducing the examination burden on students, the coaching industry's power, and the logistical costs of the current fragmented system.

The controversy around this proposal, which has been discussed in Bangladesh's educational policy circles for years without resolution, reflects the vested interests that benefit from the current fragmented system. Individual universities value the autonomy to set their own admission standards and selection criteria. The coaching industry, whose examination-preparation services generate enormous revenues, has a direct financial interest in maintaining a system in which students must prepare for multiple different examinations. And there are genuine technical concerns about the ability of a single national examination to serve the admission needs of institutions as different as BUET, the University of Dhaka, and a newly established regional university.

7.3 Admission Examination Fraud and Its Institutional Dimensions

The university admission examination system has its own specific fraud problems that are distinct from, though related to, the question paper leak problem in the school examination system. The most significant and most politically sensitive admission examination fraud was the series of question paper leaks in the medical college admission examinations, which have been the most competitive and most high-stakes of all Bangladeshi university admission tests, given the enormous social and economic premium associated with medical education.

The medical admission examination question paper leaks of 2015 and subsequent years created a profound crisis of confidence in the integrity of the medical college admission process. Students and families who had invested years of intensive preparation and enormous financial resources in coaching for the medical admission examination discovered that others had obtained the questions in advance, rendering the competitive basis of selection fraudulent. The political response, including the denial of leaks that had been confirmed by independent inquiry, destroyed trust in both the examination system and in the political institutions responsible for managing it.

The broader lesson that the medical admission examination fraud illustrates is that the more high-stakes an examination, the more valuable the examination intelligence contained in question papers, and therefore the more powerful the incentive to obtain that intelligence by fraudulent means. This is a structural problem: no amount of enforcement can eliminate fraud that is driven by sufficiently large financial incentives unless the underlying structure of the examination system is changed to reduce the value of examination intelligence. This requires either changing the nature of the examinations so that pre-knowledge of specific questions provides less advantage, or changing the stakes attached to examination performance so that the financial return to examination fraud is reduced.

Chapter Eight: Comparative Assessment -- What the International Evidence Teaches

8.1 PISA, TIMSS, and Bangladesh's Place in Global Assessment

Bangladesh does not currently participate in PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) or TIMSS (the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), the two major international comparative assessment programs that measure student learning outcomes across a large number of countries. This non-participation is itself significant: the absence of internationally comparable data on student learning outcomes means that Bangladesh has limited ability to benchmark its educational performance against comparable countries and limited accountability for the quality of learning that its education system produces.

The countries in the South and Southeast Asian region that do participate in PISA, including India (which participated on a limited basis in 2009), Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, consistently demonstrate the limitations of the assumption that enrollment rates and graduation rates are adequate proxies for learning quality. Vietnam, in particular, has produced results in PISA that are dramatically higher than its income level would predict, a finding that has attracted significant attention from the educational research community as evidence that

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poverty is not destiny in educational achievement, and that the design and quality of the educational system matter enormously.

Bangladesh's decision not to participate in PISA and TIMSS reflects a combination of factors: the cost of participation, the concern that poor results would be politically damaging, and the genuine technical challenges of implementing internationally standardized assessments in a context where the language, curriculum, and examination culture are significantly different from the OECD norms on which PISA is based. The National Student Assessment (NSA) program, which measures learning outcomes in Bengali and mathematics at grades three and five across a nationally representative sample, provides some domestically comparable data on primary level learning, but its findings, which consistently document very low learning achievement at these grade levels, have not been effectively used to drive educational improvement.

Bangladesh's participation in PISA would provide several benefits that currently absent: it would generate internationally comparable data on learning outcomes that could not be contested on the grounds of domestic political manipulation; it would provide a powerful external accountability mechanism for educational quality; and it would create a productive dialogue between Bangladesh's educational researchers and the large international community of researchers who work with PISA data. The cost, both financial and in terms of the political exposure that poor results would bring, is real, but the benefits of engagement with the global evidence base on educational quality far outweigh these costs.

8.2 Finland's Assessment Philosophy: What the Contrast Reveals

The contrast between Bangladesh's examination culture and Finland's approach to educational assessment is one of the most instructive comparisons available to educational policy in Bangladesh. Finland, as we noted in the comparative chapter of Part Six, is one of the world's best-performing educational systems on international measures of student learning. And one of the most striking features of the Finnish educational system is its almost complete absence of the high-stakes standardized testing that characterizes educational systems in most other high-performing countries.

Finnish schools do not conduct standardized national examinations until the very end of secondary education. There are no public examinations at the primary or lower secondary level equivalent to Bangladesh's PEC, JSC, or SSC. Assessment at these levels is entirely the responsibility of individual teachers and schools, and is understood primarily as a formative tool for supporting student learning rather than as a summative tool for ranking students or selecting them for subsequent opportunities. The single national high-stakes examination, the Finnish Matriculation Examination at the end of upper secondary school, is a sophisticated assessment that requires extended essay responses, synthesis across subject areas, and genuine demonstration of analytical capability, rather than the factual recall that dominates Bangladesh's examinations.

The Finnish system works in part because Finnish teachers are trusted to conduct fair, rigorous, and consistent classroom assessment without the external standardization that Bangladesh's examination system provides. This trust is possible because Finnish teachers are highly educated,

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professionally trained, and culturally respected in ways that Bangladesh's teachers are not. The lesson for Bangladesh is not that it should abolish its examination system and trust teachers to assess their students without external validation, which would not work in Bangladesh's current conditions. The lesson is that the relationship between assessment and trust is reciprocal: examination systems that are designed on the assumption that teachers cannot be trusted to assess fairly tend to produce teachers who are indeed not trusted and who increasingly lack the capacity for fair assessment, while systems that invest in teacher professional capacity and create conditions for genuine teacher assessment authority tend to produce teachers who deserve that authority.

8.3 The East Asian Examination Cultures: Cautionary Tales and Success Stories

The high-stakes examination cultures of East Asia, particularly those of South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China, offer a complex set of lessons for Bangladesh. These countries have achieved extraordinary results in international educational comparisons, with their students consistently ranking among the highest in the world in mathematics and science achievement. But their achievement has come at a significant cost in terms of student wellbeing, psychological stress, and the development of the creative and independent thinking capabilities that the twenty-first century economy demands.

South Korea's university entrance examination culture is perhaps the most extreme: the CSAT is administered once a year on a single day that is treated as a national event, with aircraft restricted from taking off or landing to avoid disturbing students during the listening comprehension portion of the test. The intensity of examination preparation in South Korea has generated a thriving private tutoring industry, chronic student stress and mental health problems, and a growing recognition among South Korean policymakers and educators that the examination culture is producing students who are academically accomplished but relatively limited in the creative, collaborative, and entrepreneurial capabilities that the twenty-first century economy requires.

China's Gaokao presents a similar picture at larger scale. The reform of the Gaokao, which Chinese education authorities have been attempting for decades, to make it a more valid measure of the capabilities that modern education should develop, rather than a measure primarily of the ability to memorize and reproduce fixed bodies of knowledge, has proved extraordinarily difficult in a context where the social stakes of the examination are so high and the pressure on students and families to prepare for it by any means available is so intense.

Bangladesh can learn from these East Asian cautionary tales that the mere introduction of a more demanding or more standardized examination system is not a solution to the examination culture problem. What is needed is not a better examination system in isolation but a different educational philosophy in which assessment is genuinely subsidiary to learning, and in which the examination is understood as a means to the end of measuring learning rather than as an end in itself.

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Chapter Nine: Legal and Constitutional Dimensions of the Examination System

9.1 The Legal Framework for Public Examinations

Bangladesh's public examination system operates within a legal framework that is detailed, complex, and in significant respects inadequate to the challenges that the system faces. The primary legislation governing public examinations includes the Bangladesh Education Boards Act of 1957 and its subsequent amendments, the Public Examinations (Offences) Act of 1980 and its 1992 amendment, and various subordinate regulations and orders issued by the Ministry of Education and the examination boards.

The Bangladesh Education Boards Act establishes the examination boards as statutory bodies with specified governance structures, powers, and responsibilities. It grants the boards authority to conduct examinations, set question papers, mark scripts, and publish results, and it provides the legal basis for the boards' authority to take action against candidates found guilty of examination malpractice. But the Act does not specify minimum standards for examination quality, does not establish independent oversight mechanisms for examination administration, and does not provide for the systematic evaluation of whether examinations are achieving their stated educational purposes.

The Public Examinations (Offences) Act provides the criminal law framework for examination malpractice, specifying the offenses that constitute examination fraud and the penalties to which those convicted are subject. As we noted in the earlier discussion of the leak problem, the penalties specified in the law, up to ten years imprisonment, are substantial in principle. The problem is enforcement, not legal provision.

9.2 The Right to Education and the Right to Fair Assessment

The constitutional framework for educational rights in Bangladesh includes Article 17, which directs the state to adopt effective measures to establish a uniform, mass-oriented, and universal system of education, and to extend free and compulsory education to all children to such a level as may be determined by law. This constitutional provision does not specify a right to fair assessment in the sense that international human rights law understands it, but it implies state obligations that are relevant to the examination system.

If the state has an obligation to provide quality education, and if the examination system systematically fails to measure educational quality accurately, then the state's examination system is failing its constitutional obligations not only to individual students who are unfairly assessed but to the national education system whose quality it is supposed to evaluate and ensure. The argument that examination fraud is not merely a criminal justice problem but a constitutional problem, insofar as it undermines the state's ability to fulfill its educational obligations, deserves serious jurisprudential development.

International human rights law, particularly the framework developed around the right to education under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (to which Bangladesh is a party) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Bangladesh has

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ratified), provides a more explicit basis for arguing that states have obligations regarding the quality and fairness of educational assessment systems. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has consistently interpreted the right to education as including a right to quality education, which implies assessment systems that genuinely and fairly measure educational achievement.

The jurisprudential development of fair assessment rights as a component of the right to education in Bangladesh's legal system is an important long-term project that legal academics and civil society organizations interested in educational rights should pursue. It would provide a legal framework for challenging specific instances of examination fraud and grade inflation as violations of constitutionally protected rights, not merely as administrative failures.

9.3 Examination Law Reform: What Is Needed

The reform of Bangladesh's examination law is needed across several dimensions. The governance framework for examination boards needs to be modernized to ensure greater transparency, greater independence from political interference, and greater accountability for examination quality. The current boards have limited formal accountability mechanisms: they are not subject to independent audit of their examination quality, they do not publish comprehensive data on examination reliability and validity, and their governance structures provide limited opportunities for external scrutiny of their decisions and performance.

The legal framework for examination security needs to be strengthened and modernized to address the technological dimensions of examination fraud that have emerged in the digital era. The use of smartphones, electronic earpieces, and other digital devices to obtain and transmit examination answers during the examination is inadequately addressed by legislation designed in the pre-digital era. A comprehensive examination security law that specifies the technological measures that examination centers must take, the protocols for detection and response to digital examination fraud, and the penalties for digital examination fraud, would provide a more adequate legal basis for examination integrity in the twenty-first century context.

The legal framework for student rights in relation to examinations also needs development. Students whose examination results are affected by question paper leaks, by marking inconsistency, or by other examination administration failures have limited legal recourse under the current framework. A student rights framework for public examinations, specifying the standards of examination administration to which students are entitled, the mechanisms for challenging results that have been affected by administration failures, and the remedies available when examinations fail to meet these standards, would provide important legal protection for the examination interests of students.

Chapter Ten: Toward a Reformed Assessment System -- Principles and Priorities

10.1 The Case for Comprehensive Examination Reform

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The analysis developed throughout this Part establishes a compelling case for comprehensive reform of Bangladesh's examination system. The existing system is failing across multiple dimensions: it is not valid as a measure of the capabilities that education is supposed to develop; it is not reliable in its measurement, being subject to grade inflation, marking inconsistency, and question paper leaks that undermine the meaning of its results; it is not fair in its treatment of students from different backgrounds; it is not useful as a source of pedagogically productive information; and it is actively harmful in its effects on the learning culture of schools, the psychological wellbeing of students, and the social functioning of the education system.

But the case for comprehensive reform is not the same as a blueprint for what that reform should look like. Examination reform is one of the most technically and politically challenging aspects of educational reform, for reasons that have been demonstrated repeatedly in other countries that have attempted it. The examination system is deeply embedded in the social culture of Bangladesh, in the aspirations of millions of families, in the economic interests of the coaching center industry, in the professional practices of tens of thousands of teachers and examination administrators, and in the political calculations of governments that know that examination results are one of the most publicly visible indicators of their educational performance. Reforming the examination system requires navigating all of these embedded interests and expectations, not simply improving the technical design of the examinations.

10.2 A Differentiated Assessment Architecture

The most important single reform needed in Bangladesh's assessment system is the development of a differentiated assessment architecture that distinguishes clearly between the different purposes of assessment and provides different assessment instruments for each purpose.

For the purpose of formative assessment, the support of ongoing learning in classrooms and schools, the reform needed is not a new examination but a different culture of classroom assessment: assessment that is continuous, individualized, feedback-oriented, and embedded in the learning process rather than superimposed on it from outside. This requires the professional development of teachers in the design and conduct of formative assessment, the reduction of the time pressure of examination preparation that currently leaves little space for genuine formative assessment activity, and the development of assessment frameworks that guide teachers in assessing the competencies specified in the new curriculum rather than simply the factual content of the syllabus.

For the purpose of summative assessment, the production of formal records of educational achievement at the end of key educational phases, the reform needed is an examination system that has genuine validity, that actually measures the capabilities that the curriculum intends to develop, and that has genuine reliability, producing consistent results that reflect student learning rather than examination technique, marker generosity, or access to question paper intelligence.

For the purpose of gatekeeping, the control of access to subsequent educational and employment opportunities, the reform needed is the separation of this function from the high-stakes public examinations that currently serve it, and the development of more appropriate selection instruments for different gatekeeping purposes. University admission should be based on a

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combination of HSC performance and university-specific assessment of the capabilities relevant to the specific program of study; scholarship allocation should be based on a comprehensive assessment of academic potential and financial need; and public employment selection should be based on job-relevant competency assessment rather than the competitive reproduction of academic knowledge.

10.3 The Technology of Assessment Reform

The digital transformation of assessment is one of the most rapidly developing areas of educational technology, and Bangladesh can potentially benefit from advances in assessment technology that were not available when the current examination system was designed. Computer-adaptive testing, in which the examination adjusts the difficulty of each subsequent question based on the student's response to previous questions, provides a more efficient and more precise measurement of student ability than fixed-form examinations. Item banking, the systematic collection and calibration of large numbers of examination items that can be combined into multiple examination forms, reduces the risk of question paper leaks by making it impossible to predict exactly which questions will appear on any given examination. Automated essay scoring, which uses machine learning to assess the quality of written responses to examination questions, is advancing rapidly and could potentially be used to assess aspects of examination performance that are currently too costly to assess reliably using human markers alone.

The introduction of computer-based testing for some or all of Bangladesh's public examinations would address several of the current system's most acute problems. Computer-delivered examinations are much more difficult to leak than paper-based examinations, because each student or each testing center can receive a different form of the examination drawn from an item bank. Computer-delivered examinations also allow more rapid result reporting, more detailed analysis of student performance patterns, and more systematic quality assurance of examination administration.

The constraint on computer-based testing in Bangladesh is infrastructure: the vast majority of Bangladesh's school examination centers do not have the computing infrastructure to deliver computer-based examinations to large numbers of students simultaneously. The development of this infrastructure would require substantial investment, and the equity implications of the transition must be carefully managed to ensure that students in under-resourced areas are not disadvantaged by the shift to computer-based assessment. A phased approach, beginning with computer-based testing in urban areas with adequate infrastructure and expanding as infrastructure is developed in rural areas, might provide a path forward that is technically and logistically feasible.

10.4 Teacher Assessment and Professional Accountability

The development of teacher assessment capacity is a prerequisite for any serious reform of Bangladesh's assessment system, because assessment reform ultimately depends on teachers who can conduct valid and consistent assessment of student learning, not only in the examination hall but in the classroom. The current professional development system for teachers does not

adequately develop assessment competence: teacher education programs give insufficient attention to the principles of educational measurement and the practical skills of formative assessment design and conduct.

A comprehensive teacher assessment capacity development program, organized at the national level but delivered through the cluster-based professional learning community structures that we recommended in Part Five, would provide the professional foundation for a more sophisticated assessment culture in Bangladesh's schools. This program should address both the technical dimensions of assessment design and the ethical dimensions of professional assessment conduct, including the management of the conflicts of interest that arise when teachers assess their own students, the importance of consistency and fairness in marking, and the responsibilities of professional assessment integrity.

The development of genuine teacher assessment capacity would also create the conditions for a more meaningful school-based assessment component in the new curriculum's assessment framework. The school-based assessment activities that the 2023 curriculum specifies are currently implemented with extreme inconsistency, in large part because teachers have not been adequately prepared to conduct them. With genuine professional development in assessment, and with appropriate moderation mechanisms to ensure that school-based assessment is conducted consistently across different schools, it would be possible to develop a school-based assessment system that is credible enough to carry genuine weight in the summative record and the gatekeeping decisions that depend on that record.

Conclusion to Part Seven: The Examination We Deserve

The examination system is the most powerful statement that an educational system makes about what it values. Bangladesh's examination system, in its current form, states that what the educational system values is the faithful reproduction of fixed bodies of knowledge under time pressure, the competitive ranking of students against each other on a single performance dimension, and the production of results that satisfy political expectations regardless of their accuracy as measures of genuine learning.

This year's SSC and HSC results both serve as a wake-up call to take a critical look at our education system. Europe-solidaire The wake-up call of 2025, when the removal of artificial grade inflation produced HSC pass rates of 58.83 percent, the lowest in more than two decades, has forced a moment of confrontation with the reality that the examination system has been concealing for years. That confrontation is necessary and overdue, but it is not sufficient. The confrontation must be followed by the kind of comprehensive, philosophically serious, technically rigorous, and politically courageous reform of the entire assessment architecture that this Part has outlined.

Such reform will not be easy. The examination system is one of the most deeply embedded institutions in Bangladesh's social and cultural life. The annual drama of examination results, the social weight attached to GPA performance, the coaching center industry, the university

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admission tournament, and the complex of anxieties, ambitions, and social calculations that the examination system has generated over generations, cannot be transformed by policy decree or administrative reorganization alone. They require a cultural shift in how Bangladesh understands the relationship between assessment and education, between measurement and learning, between the examination result and the educated person.

That cultural shift begins with a simple but profound insight: the examination is not the education. The examination is a tool for understanding what the education has produced. When the tool is badly designed, when it measures the wrong things, when its results are distorted by inflation and fraud, and when its social effects are primarily to generate anxiety and reproduce inequality rather than to provide useful information about learning, the tool has become destructive rather than useful. The reform of Bangladesh's examination system is, at its deepest level, an invitation to rediscover the purpose of education itself, and to build an assessment system that genuinely serves that purpose rather than systematically subverting it.

The children of Bangladesh deserve an education system that teaches them to think, and an assessment system that fairly measures how well they have learned to do so. They deserve examinations that they can prepare for by learning, rather than examinations they can only succeed in by memorizing or cheating. They deserve assessment that develops their intellectual confidence rather than destroying it, that gives them genuine feedback on their strengths and areas for development rather than a single number that purports to summarize the entire educational achievement of years of learning. And they deserve the social and political systems that will actually deliver on these promises, rather than the systems that have, for too long, promised much and delivered little.

Part Eight of this commentary will turn from the examination system to the language question in Bangladesh's education, examining one of the most complex and politically sensitive dimensions of the entire educational landscape: the role of Bangla as the medium of instruction and its relationship to English, to the indigenous languages of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and to the Arabic of the Madrasa tradition; the politics of language in education; the relationship between language policy and educational equity; and the reform of English language education that Bangladesh so urgently needs.

Supplementary Analytical Commentary: The PEC and JSC Abolition - What the Reform Has and Has Not Achieved

The abolition of the Primary Education Completion (PEC) examination at the end of class five and the Junior School Certificate (JSC) examination at the end of class eight was one of the most significant reforms of the examination system undertaken in the recent period. These examinations had been widely criticized for adding unnecessary examination pressure to children at very young ages, for distorting the curriculum of classes four and five and classes seven and eight toward examination preparation rather than genuine learning, and for contributing to the coaching center culture at an age when children should be developing their love of learning rather than their anxiety about performance.

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The abolition of these examinations removed a layer of high-stakes pressure from the educational careers of primary and junior secondary school children. But the question of what replaced them is more complex and less clearly positive. The school-based assessment that replaced the PEC and JSC has been implemented with extreme inconsistency, and in many schools it has degenerated into a bureaucratic exercise rather than a genuine formative assessment activity. The parental anxiety that the PEC and JSC examinations channeled has not disappeared with the examinations; it has been redirected, in many cases, toward even more intensive SSC preparation beginning at earlier grades, or toward the private tutoring and coaching activities that continue to grow regardless of what official examination policy does.

The deeper problem that the abolition of the PEC and JSC did not address is the root cause of the examination culture: the high-stakes nature of the SSC and HSC, which makes every prior educational experience primarily an instrument of preparation for those examinations. As long as the SSC and HSC remain the overwhelming determinants of educational and social destiny, the entire educational career that precedes them will be organized in their shadow. Reforming the PEC and JSC without reforming the SSC and HSC is a reform of symptoms rather than causes, and the limited success of the reform in changing the examination culture of Bangladesh's schools is a predictable consequence of this limitation.

Part Eight will examine the language question in Bangladesh's education in comparable depth, addressing the politics of Bangla, the crisis of English language education, the rights of linguistic minorities, and the relationship between language policy and educational equity and quality.

PART EIGHT: THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

Bangla, English, Indigenous Tongues, Arabic, and the Politics of Linguistic Power in Bangladeshi Education

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Prologue to Part Eight: Why Language Is Never Just Language

There is a temptation, when approaching the question of language in education, to treat it as a technical matter. Which language produces better learning outcomes at the primary level? How many hours per week should be devoted to second-language instruction? What pedagogical methods work best for teaching English to speakers of other languages? These are real and important questions, and they will receive sustained attention in the chapters that follow. But to begin with them, to allow them to frame the entire inquiry, is to misunderstand what is fundamentally at stake when a society debates the language in which its children should be educated.

Language in education is never simply a pedagogical instrument. It is simultaneously a political symbol, a social badge, an economic passport, a cultural inheritance, and a philosophical claim

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about the nature of knowledge itself. The debate about which language to use in Bangladeshi classrooms is, beneath its surface, a debate about what kind of country Bangladesh is and what kind of country it wants to become. It is a debate about identity: Bengali nationalism, Islamic civilization, global modernity, and indigenous cultural survival are all implicated in the question of what language a child hears when she walks through the schoolroom door on her first day of formal education. It is a debate about power: the linguistic choices encoded in educational policy determine who can access the elite, who is excluded from it, and on what terms the majority of Bangladesh's population participates in the formal economy and the formal state. And it is a debate about philosophy: about whether knowledge is best acquired in the language of one's home and community, or in a language that opens access to a larger world; about whether education should be rooted in local culture or oriented toward universal standards; about whether linguistic diversity is a resource to be celebrated or a problem to be managed.

Bangladesh is a country with an extraordinarily rich and complicated relationship to language. Its national identity was forged, more than anything else, through the Language Movement of 1952, in which students at the University of Dhaka and across East Bengal sacrificed their lives to resist the imposition of Urdu as the sole state language of Pakistan, insisting on the right to use Bengali as an official language of their nation. The twenty-first of February, the date of the 1952 massacre, is now commemorated globally as International Mother Language Day, recognized by UNESCO in 1999 as a day for the celebration of linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Bangladesh, in other words, gave the world the concept of dying for one's language. And yet this same country maintains an educational system in which the children of its elite are educated in English, in which the children of its rural and urban poor receive a Bangla-medium education that closes rather than opens doors to economic opportunity, in which the children of its indigenous communities are educated in a language that is foreign to their homes and communities, and in which hundreds of thousands of students in the Madrasa system study their most important subjects in Arabic, a language that most of them will never speak conversationally. The gap between Bangladesh's symbolic commitment to its mother tongue and the actual linguistic reality of its education system is one of the most striking and revealing contradictions in the entire landscape of Bangladeshi educational policy.

This part of the commentary is an attempt to understand that contradiction in its full depth and complexity. It will proceed through the philosophy, history, politics, economics, law, and pedagogy of language in Bangladeshi education, drawing on the most recent scholarship and the most current policy developments, including those that have emerged in the transformative political context of the post-August 2024 period. It will not reach easy conclusions, because easy conclusions are not available. The language question in Bangladesh is genuinely hard, genuinely contested, and genuinely unresolved. Understanding why it is so hard, so contested, and so unresolved is itself a significant intellectual achievement, and it is the first step toward the kind of reform that the situation demands.

Chapter One: The Philosophy of Language in Education -- Foundations, Frameworks, and Fundamental Questions

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1.1 Language and Mind: The Philosophical Backdrop

The question of which language should be used in education is not new. It is as old as formal education itself. In ancient Athens, the question was whether children of non-Greek-speaking families should be educated in Greek. In the Roman Empire, the question was whether Latin or Greek was the appropriate language of higher learning. In medieval Europe, the question was whether the sacred language of Latin could or should give way to the vernacular tongues of ordinary people. In the colonial period across Asia and Africa, the question was whether colonized peoples should be educated in their own languages or in the languages of their colonizers. In each of these contexts, the language question was simultaneously a question about culture, about power, about identity, and about the nature of knowledge.

The philosophical foundations of the contemporary debate about language in education rest on a set of claims about the relationship between language and mind, and between language and learning. The most fundamental of these claims is the Vygotskian insight that language is not merely a vehicle for communicating already-formed thoughts: it is the medium in which thinking itself takes place. Lev Vygotsky's account of the relationship between language, thought, and social interaction, developed in his great work "Thought and Language" (1934) and in the essays collected in "Mind in Society" (1978), established the theoretical foundation for understanding why the choice of language in education is not a trivial technical matter but a question that goes to the heart of the cognitive development of the child.

For Vygotsky, the child develops higher cognitive functions, including abstract reasoning, problem-solving, and the capacity for complex analysis, through the internalization of the social and linguistic interactions that she experiences in her environment. The language in which these interactions take place is not a transparent medium that leaves the content of thinking unchanged: it actively shapes what can be thought, how it can be expressed, and how deeply it can be understood. When a child is taught in her mother tongue, she is able to draw on the full richness of her existing conceptual and linguistic resources, making connections between the new knowledge she encounters in school and the knowledge she has already developed through her experience in her home and community. When she is taught in a foreign language, she must simultaneously acquire the language and the content, a cognitive double burden that research consistently shows has significant negative effects on learning outcomes, particularly in the early years of schooling.

This Vygotskian insight provides the theoretical foundation for the now-substantial body of empirical research on Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), which has consistently demonstrated that children learn more effectively when they are initially taught in their home language and gradually introduced to additional languages as they develop cognitive and linguistic confidence. The UNESCO position on this question, consistently maintained since the 1953 monograph "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education" and reaffirmed in multiple subsequent policy documents including the 2016 "If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?" report, is that children learn best in their mother tongue and that early education in the mother tongue, with a thoughtful and gradual transition to additional languages, produces better outcomes across all subjects than early immersion in a second or foreign language.

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The philosophical implications of this research for Bangladesh are direct and profound. Bangladesh has over 54 recognized indigenous languages in addition to Bangla, and several hundred thousand children begin their schooling in homes where Bangla is not the primary language of communication. These children face exactly the double burden that Vygotsky's framework predicts: they must acquire a new language while simultaneously trying to acquire new knowledge through that language. The evidence that this significantly disadvantages their learning outcomes is robust and consistent. And yet Bangladesh's educational system has, for most of its history, treated the provision of Bangla-medium instruction as the solution to the language problem rather than recognizing that for a significant minority of Bangladesh's children, Bangla is itself a second language and therefore part of the problem rather than the solution.

1.2 The Political Philosophy of Language: Rawls, Taylor, and the Claims of Linguistic Community

The philosophical debate about language in education is not only a debate about cognitive development. It is also a debate about rights, about justice, and about the proper relationship between the state and the cultural communities of which it is composed. Here, the philosophical frameworks that are most relevant are those of political philosophy rather than developmental psychology.

John Rawls's theory of justice, as elaborated in "A Theory of Justice" (1971) and "Political Liberalism" (1993), provides one framework for thinking about linguistic rights in education. For Rawls, a just society is one that is organized according to principles that free and rational persons would choose from behind a "veil of ignorance," a hypothetical condition in which they do not know their particular position in society, including their linguistic community, their class, their ethnicity, or their nationality. From behind this veil, Rawls argues, rational persons would choose principles that protect the basic liberties of all and that govern inequalities so as to benefit the least advantaged members of society. Applied to the language question, a Rawlsian analysis suggests that a just educational system would not systematically disadvantage children on the basis of their linguistic background, and that a state which provides high-quality education in one language while denying it to speakers of other languages is violating the principle of equal basic liberty.

Charles Taylor's communitarian critique of Rawlsian liberalism, developed most fully in "Sources of the Self" (1989) and "The Ethics of Authenticity" (1991), adds another dimension to the philosophical analysis. For Taylor, the liberal emphasis on individual rights and procedural justice fails to capture the fundamentally communal nature of identity and the ways in which participation in a cultural community is not merely an individual preference but a constitutive element of what it means to be a person. Taylor's framework suggests that the preservation and development of linguistic communities is not merely an instrumental matter of maximizing individual welfare but a question of recognizing the equal dignity of different cultural communities and their right to transmit their languages, cultures, and ways of life to their children. The state that educates all children in a single dominant language while allowing the languages of minority communities to wither is not merely being inefficient: it is disrespecting the equal dignity of those communities and their members.

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Will Kymlicka's influential theory of multicultural citizenship, developed in "Multicultural Citizenship" (1995) and "Politics in the Vernacular" (2001), attempts to reconcile liberal individual rights with the recognition of cultural communities by distinguishing between different types of minority rights. For Kymlicka, national minorities, groups with their own historical homeland and societal culture, have legitimate claims to a range of linguistic and cultural rights, including the right to education in their own language, that go beyond the rights of immigrant groups who have voluntarily chosen to join a new society. The indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, on Kymlicka's analysis, would have strong claims to education in their own languages, claims grounded not in the preferences of individuals but in the historical prior occupation of their territories and the distinctive nature of their societal cultures.

These philosophical frameworks provide important tools for analyzing the language situation in Bangladesh's education system. They suggest that the current arrangement, in which some children receive their education in their mother tongue and others do not, cannot be justified simply on grounds of administrative convenience or resource constraints. It raises fundamental questions of justice and equal dignity that require principled philosophical engagement, not merely technical solutions.

1.3 The Economics of Language: Human Capital Theory and Its Limitations

The dominant framework within which language policy in education has been debated in Bangladesh over the past three decades is not philosophical but economic. Influenced by human capital theory and by the increasingly global character of the labor market, a powerful current of opinion in Bangladesh argues that the most important function of the educational system's language policy is to maximize the English language proficiency of Bangladesh's graduates, because English proficiency is the key to participation in the global economy, to attracting foreign investment, to earning remittances from employment abroad, and to competing for the high-skilled jobs that economic development requires.

This economic argument has significant empirical force. English proficiency is consistently associated, in Bangladesh as in many other countries, with higher wages, better employment prospects, and greater social mobility. A striking finding from recent research using Bourdieu's framework of symbolic capital, published in 2024 and 2025 using data from media analysis, policy documents, and job advertisements, is that English-medium graduates in Bangladesh secure approximately ninety-three percent of corporate sector positions, while Bangla-medium graduates face substantially limited mobility in the formal private sector. This data point is both economically important and deeply troubling from the perspective of social justice, because it means that the current language structure of Bangladesh's education system is functioning as one of the most powerful mechanisms of social stratification and reproduction of inequality in the entire society.

The human capital argument for prioritizing English in education has, however, significant limitations that are often overlooked in the policy debate. First, there is a confusion between the goal of developing English language proficiency and the method of using English as the medium of instruction. Research consistently shows that the most effective way to develop genuine English language proficiency is not early immersion in English-medium instruction, which tends

to produce poor outcomes in both English and other subjects for children who come from non-English-speaking homes, but rather high-quality English language teaching as a subject within a curriculum that otherwise uses the child's mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The best-resourced English-medium schools in Bangladesh, those attended by the children of the elite, are able to achieve good English outcomes partly because their students come from homes where English is already present, where parents can provide additional support, and where the social environment reinforces English learning. These conditions are not generalizable to the mass of Bangladesh's students.

Second, the human capital argument tends to assume that the primary and perhaps sole purpose of education is to prepare individuals for participation in the labor market. This is a philosophically impoverished account of education that omits the development of citizenship, the cultivation of cultural identity, the promotion of intellectual development as an intrinsic good, and the many other purposes that a rich conception of education encompasses. An educational system designed entirely around the goal of labor market preparation is an educational system that has lost sight of what education fundamentally is.

Third, the human capital argument for English tends to overlook the fact that the vast majority of Bangladesh's economic activity, including its enormous agricultural sector, its large informal economy, its small and medium enterprise sector, and much of its garment industry, operates in Bangla rather than in English. The emphasis on English in education may serve the interests of the small minority of students who will enter the corporate and professional elite, but it systematically neglects the educational needs of the overwhelming majority who will live and work in a Bangla-speaking environment.

1.4 Language and Identity: The Linguistic Turn in Educational Philosophy

The most recent developments in the philosophy of language in education have been shaped by what scholars call the "linguistic turn" in social theory, by poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of standard language ideologies, and by the emergence of concepts such as "translanguaging" and "linguistic repertoire" that challenge the traditional assumption that languages are discrete, bounded systems that should be kept separate in educational contexts.

The concept of translanguaging, developed most influentially by Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei in their 2014 book "Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education," refers to the flexible use of a person's entire linguistic repertoire, drawing on elements of all the languages they know rather than adhering to a single named language, in the course of communication and meaning-making. Translanguaging research has challenged the traditional "bilingual" model in which different languages are kept in separate compartments, suggesting instead that for multilingual speakers, the different "languages" they know are not separate systems but resources within a single, flexible linguistic repertoire that can be deployed as the communicative situation demands. Educators working from a translanguaging framework argue that classroom practices that honor and draw on the full linguistic repertoire of students, rather than insisting on the exclusive use of a single official language, are more cognitively effective, more culturally respectful, and more aligned with the actual linguistic practices of multilingual communities.

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Applied to Bangladesh, the translanguaging framework has important implications. In a country where the boundaries between Bangla and English are constantly being negotiated and blurred in urban educated discourse, where code-switching between Bangla and English is the normal practice of many educated Bangladeshis, and where the indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the plains districts operate in multiple linguistic registers, the model of strict language separation that has dominated official educational policy is increasingly at odds with the actual linguistic reality of students' lives. A translanguaging-informed approach to language in education would seek to build on students' full linguistic resources rather than suppressing the parts that do not match the officially designated language of instruction.

This theoretical perspective connects to the growing body of postcolonial scholarship on language in education, which examines how colonial language policies continue to shape educational systems long after formal decolonization. The work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan novelist and intellectual who gave up writing in English to write in his mother tongue Gikuyu, is paradigmatic in this tradition. His book "Decolonising the Mind" (1986), which has been enormously influential in African educational discourse, argues that the continued use of colonial languages as media of instruction in post-independence African and Asian education systems represents a form of cultural colonialism that perpetuates the intellectual dependence of formerly colonized peoples on their former colonizers. The argument has direct and forceful application to Bangladesh, where the use of English as the language of elite education represents a continuity with colonial educational structures that the Language Movement of 1952 never fully dismantled.

Chapter Two: The Historical Architecture of Language Policy in Bangladesh

2.1 The Language Movement and Its Ambiguous Legacy

To understand the language question in contemporary Bangladesh, it is necessary to begin with the event that is most fundamental to Bangladeshi national identity: the Language Movement of 1952. The story is well known in outline but deserves careful retelling in the context of educational policy, because it reveals the complexity of what was at stake and the ambiguity of the legacy it created.

When Pakistan was created in August 1947, its eastern wing, which would become Bangladesh, contained more than half the total population of the new state. The overwhelming majority of this population spoke Bengali as their mother tongue. Yet the political and cultural elite of West Pakistan, drawing on the Islamic tradition in which Arabic is the sacred language of scripture, and on the historical prestige of Urdu as the language of Muslim high culture in the Indian subcontinent, promoted Urdu as the sole national language of Pakistan. The Governor-General Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared in a speech in Dhaka in March 1948 that Urdu and Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan, a declaration that provoked immediate protest from Bengali speakers who recognized that language policy was simultaneously a policy of cultural subordination and political exclusion.

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The protest crystallized on the twenty-first of February 1952, when students at the University of Dhaka defied a government ban on public assembly and gathered to demonstrate for the recognition of Bengali as an official language of Pakistan. Police opened fire on the demonstrators, killing at least four students: Abul Barkat, Rafiquddin Ahmed, Abul Jabbar, and Shafiur Rahman, with additional deaths reported in subsequent days. The martyrs of the Language Movement became the symbolic foundation of Bangladeshi national identity, and their sacrifice shaped not only the political but the cultural and educational orientation of the Bengali nationalist movement that would eventually produce an independent Bangladesh in 1971.

The ambiguous legacy of the Language Movement for educational policy lies in what it established and what it left unresolved. It established the principle that a people have the right to be educated, governed, and to live their lives in their own language, and that this right is worth dying for. This is a principle of profound and enduring importance. But the Language Movement was, at its core, a movement of the Bengali-speaking majority of East Pakistan against the Urdu-speaking elite of West Pakistan. It did not, and was not designed to, address the rights of the non-Bengali-speaking communities who lived within the territory of East Bengal: the Chakma, the Marma, the Tripura, the Garo, the Santal, the Oraon, and the many other indigenous peoples whose mother tongues are not Bengali and who were, in the emerging logic of Bengali nationalism, included within the Bengali nation without their linguistic and cultural specificity being recognized or accommodated.

The Language Movement's legacy is therefore Janus-faced: it simultaneously celebrates the right of a people to their own language and creates a Bengali linguistic nationalism that tends to subsume or suppress the linguistic rights of non-Bengali communities within the new nation. This tension is alive in Bangladesh today, and it shapes the language politics of education in ways that will be examined throughout this part.

2.2 Language Policy from Independence to the Khuda Commission

When Bangladesh achieved independence in December 1971, the new government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman moved rapidly to establish Bangla as the sole official language of the new state. The Constitution of Bangladesh, adopted in November 1972, declared Bengali to be the state language of the Republic. This was not merely a symbolic gesture: it was a comprehensive policy commitment that had immediate implications for education, administration, law, and public life.

The educational implications were worked out most fully in the report of the first national education commission, the Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission, which submitted its report in May 1974. The Khuda Commission's approach to language was explicitly nationalist and "decolonizing" in intent. It recommended the use of Bengali as the medium of instruction at all levels of education, including higher education, and proposed a phased program for replacing English as the language of university teaching and research. The commission recognized the importance of learning English as a foreign language but was firmly opposed to the use of English as a medium of instruction, which it viewed as a colonial legacy that perpetuated the cultural and intellectual dependence of Bangladesh on foreign models.

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The Khuda Commission's language recommendations reflected the dominant mood of post-independence Bengali nationalism, in which the assertion of the Bengali language as the medium of all public life was seen as a natural and necessary corollary of national liberation. But the commission's vision was never fully implemented. The replacement of English by Bengali at the university level proved far more difficult than anticipated, partly because the corpus of Bengali academic literature was inadequate to support university-level teaching in most disciplines, partly because the existing university faculty had been educated in English and were not easily able to switch to Bengali as a teaching medium, and partly because the international scientific and scholarly literature was overwhelmingly in English. The result was a progressive divergence between official policy and actual practice: Bengali was proclaimed the medium of instruction in higher education, but English remained the dominant language of serious academic discourse, of textbooks at the advanced level, and of research publication.

2.3 Military Rule, Islamization, and the Language Question: 1975-1990

The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 and the subsequent period of military rule under Ziaur Rahman and then Hussain Muhammad Ershad transformed the political context in which language policy was made. The explicit Bengali nationalism of the Mujib era was moderated, and Islam was increasingly emphasized as a component of national identity alongside or even in place of Bengali ethnicity. This shift had significant implications for the language question in education.

The most important implication was the promotion of Arabic as an educational language, through the expansion of the Madrasa system and through the introduction of Islamic studies as a mandatory component of the general education curriculum. Ziaur Rahman's government added "Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim" ("In the name of God, the most Gracious, the most Merciful") to the preamble of the Constitution and replaced "secularism" with "absolute trust and faith in Allah." Ershad went further, declaring Islam the state religion in 1988. These changes reflected a shift in the understanding of national identity from the primarily linguistic Bengali nationalism of the independence era to a conception of national identity that incorporated Islamic religious identity as a central element. The language implications were indirect but real: a stronger emphasis on Islamic identity meant a stronger educational role for Arabic, the language of the Quran and of Islamic learning, and a more complex relationship between the Bengali language as the marker of national identity and the Arabic language as the marker of religious identity.

During this period, the English question also became more complex. The military governments, oriented toward economic modernization and international investment, were more sympathetic to English language education than the nationalist governments of the independence era. The private English-medium school sector, which had survived the Language Movement era in a marginalized form, began to grow more rapidly, catering to the emerging urban professional and business class. The Cambridge O-level and A-level system, introduced in a small number of elite private schools, established a foothold for an entirely separate educational track for the children of the affluent, a track that prioritized English above all else and was explicitly oriented toward international rather than national educational standards.

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This period thus saw the emergence, in embryonic form, of the three-tiered language structure that characterizes Bangladesh's education system today: a Bengali-medium system for the majority, a Madrasa system oriented toward Arabic and Islamic learning, and an English-medium system for the affluent elite. The philosophical and social consequences of this tripartite structure will be examined in detail in subsequent chapters.

2.4 The 1990s: Democratic Return, English Fever, and the Globalization Context

The restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1990 and the subsequent acceleration of economic liberalization opened a new chapter in the politics of language in education. The 1990s saw the rapid growth of the private English-medium school sector, driven by several converging forces: the expansion of the garment industry and the related growth of an urban middle class with aspirations for the social mobility that English proficiency symbolized; the increasing volume of remittances from Bangladeshi workers abroad, which gave many families the resources to invest in English-medium education for their children; and the growing influence of international development organizations, NGOs, and multinational corporations in Bangladesh's economy, which created a premium on English language skills in the most desirable sectors of the labor market.

The "English fever" of the 1990s and 2000s, as scholars have described it, generated a paradox at the heart of Bangladesh's language politics. On one hand, the Language Movement's legacy maintained a powerful symbolic commitment to Bengali as the national language and as the proper medium of education for Bangladesh's citizens. On the other hand, the economic reality was that English proficiency was increasingly the key to the most desirable forms of social mobility, and families with the resources to do so were voting with their feet by choosing English-medium education for their children.

The political response to this paradox was, characteristically, contradictory. Successive governments maintained the official commitment to Bengali-medium education as the norm, while allowing the English-medium sector to expand largely unregulated. The result was a system in which the official language policy and the actual practice of education were increasingly divergent, with the official policy serving the rhetorical purposes of Bengali nationalist politics while the actual practice served the economic interests of those with the resources to make choices. Those without resources were confined to the Bengali-medium system, regardless of the economic costs that this imposed on their life prospects.

2.5 The National Education Policy 2010 and Its Language Provisions

The National Education Policy 2010, developed under Sheikh Hasina's first post-return government with the extensive consultative process organized by the Kabir Education Commission, represented the most comprehensive attempt to date to articulate a coherent national language policy for education. The policy made several significant commitments on the language question.

On Bangla, the policy reaffirmed the constitutional commitment to Bengali as the state language and the medium of instruction, while also recognizing that this policy needed to be implemented

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with greater consistency and higher quality than had previously been the case. The policy called for significant improvements in the quality of Bangla language teaching, including the development of a more systematic and linguistically informed approach to the teaching of literacy in the early years of primary school.

On English, the policy took a nuanced position that attempted to balance the national symbolic commitment to Bengali with the economic reality of English's importance. It established English as a compulsory subject from class one, beginning a much earlier introduction of English than had previously been the policy, while maintaining Bengali as the medium of instruction for all other subjects. The decision to introduce English from the first year of primary school reflected the influence of communicative language teaching approaches and the recognition that earlier exposure to English, if it could be made genuinely effective, would improve outcomes. The practical difficulty is that the decision to introduce English from class one was made without providing the resources, training, or pedagogical support that would have been necessary to implement it effectively, resulting in English instruction at the primary level that was, in many schools, more symbolic than substantive.

On indigenous languages, the 2010 policy was more progressive than any previous policy document, committing for the first time to the principle of mother-tongue-based multilingual education for children whose mother tongue is not Bengali. This commitment was partially implemented in 2017, when the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) produced pre-primary textbooks in five indigenous languages: Chakma, Marma, Kokborok (Tripura), Garo, and Sadri. But the implementation was limited in important ways that we will examine in detail: it covered only the pre-primary level, it was limited to five of the thirty-five or more indigenous languages spoken in Bangladesh, and it was not accompanied by the teacher training, curriculum development, or institutional support that would have been necessary to make it genuinely effective.

Chapter Three: Bangla as National Language and Medium of Instruction -- Achievements, Failures, and Philosophical Challenges

3.1 The Constitutional Status of Bangla and Its Educational Implications

Article three of the Constitution of Bangladesh establishes that "The state language of the Republic is Bangla." This constitutional provision, reflecting the legacy of the Language Movement, has been interpreted to mean that Bengali should be the medium of instruction at all levels of the state education system, the language of all official government communications, and the primary language of public life in Bangladesh.

The educational implications of this constitutional commitment are substantial. For the approximately ninety-eight percent of Bangladesh's population who speak Bangla as a first or primary language, the provision of Bangla-medium education represents an important affirmation of their linguistic identity and an appropriate pedagogical choice. The research evidence strongly supports the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction,

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particularly in the early years of schooling, and for the Bangla-speaking majority of Bangladesh, Bangla-medium education is both a constitutional right and the pedagogically appropriate choice.

But the constitutional commitment to Bangla as the state language has also had problematic implications that are less frequently acknowledged in public discourse. First, it has been interpreted in ways that marginalize the linguistic rights of the approximately two percent of Bangladesh's population whose mother tongue is not Bangla: the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the plains districts, as well as Urdu-speaking communities including the Bihari population that remained in Bangladesh after the 1971 war. Second, it has created an official monolingualism that is at odds with the actual linguistic diversity of Bangladesh, a diversity that the state has been reluctant to acknowledge because it complicates the simple equation between Bengali language, Bengali ethnicity, and Bangladeshi national identity that the Language Movement's legacy established.

Third, and perhaps most importantly for the argument being developed in this part, the constitutional commitment to Bangla as the medium of instruction has created a tension with the educational role of English that has never been satisfactorily resolved. English has significant economic and social value in Bangladesh, and there is a genuine public demand for English language education. But the constitutional and symbolic primacy of Bangla makes it politically difficult to acknowledge this demand openly and to design educational policy around it. The result is a system that officially commits to Bengali-medium education while allowing English-medium education to flourish as a semi-regulated private sector, creating a two-track system whose inequity is evident but whose resolution requires a degree of political courage that few governments have been willing to display.

3.2 The Quality of Bangla Language Teaching: A System Under Scrutiny

The constitutional commitment to Bangla as the medium of instruction is not the same as a commitment to high-quality Bangla language education. The distinction matters enormously. A child can be educated in Bangla, in the formal sense of receiving instruction delivered in the Bengali language, while receiving education that is of very poor quality, including education in the Bengali language itself as a subject. This is, unfortunately, the situation in a large proportion of Bangladesh's primary and secondary schools.

The teaching of Bangla as a subject in Bangladesh's schools is characterized by several systemic problems that have been documented consistently across evaluation studies conducted over the past two decades. The approach to literacy instruction at the primary level has been dominated by phonics-based decoding and by rote memorization of the alphabet and basic vocabulary, without the kind of systematic, linguistically informed approach to reading development that the research literature on Bengali literacy supports. The teaching of Bangla literature and grammar at the secondary level has been dominated by a highly traditional philological approach that emphasizes the memorization of facts about authors and texts rather than the development of genuine literary understanding or analytical writing skills. The new curriculum introduced in 2023 attempts to shift from this tradition toward a more communicative and competency-based approach to Bangla language education, but the implementation challenges are formidable, as we

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have documented in the examination of the 2023 curriculum reform in earlier parts of this commentary.

The situation of Bangla language teaching in Bangladesh is also complicated by the relationship between standard Bangla and the numerous regional dialects spoken across the country. Standard Bangla, the prestige variety associated with the dialect of Dhaka and the literary tradition of West Bengal, is significantly different from the regional varieties spoken in Sylhet, Chittagong, Noakhali, Rajshahi, and other parts of the country. Children who come from homes where a regional dialect is spoken may find that the standard Bangla of the classroom is almost as foreign to their natural speech as English would be. This linguistic distance between home language and school language is a significant and underappreciated source of educational disadvantage for children from dialectally distinct regions, and it is a problem that the standard narrative of Bangla as Bangladesh's native language tends to obscure.

3.3 Bangla in Higher Education: The Unfinished Revolution

The ambitious goal of the Khuda Commission in 1974 to make Bangla the medium of instruction in higher education has remained, fifty years later, fundamentally unrealized. The University of Dhaka and the other public universities of Bangladesh officially use Bangla as a medium of instruction in the humanities and social sciences, but the reality in most academic departments is a complex bilingual practice in which the language of the classroom may be Bangla but the language of textbooks, scholarly reading, research publications, and professional academic discourse is overwhelmingly English.

The practical reasons for this failure are well understood. The development of a comprehensive corpus of Bangla-language academic texts in science, engineering, medicine, law, and other professional disciplines would require an investment in translation and original scholarship that has never been adequately funded. The international scholarly literature is overwhelmingly published in English, and researchers who wish to participate in international academic discourse must be able to read and publish in English regardless of the language policy of their home institutions. The globalization of academic publishing and research funding has, if anything, strengthened the position of English in Bangladesh's universities over the past two decades, as researchers increasingly need to publish in international journals, participate in international conferences, and access international databases, all of which operate predominantly in English.

The private university sector, which has expanded enormously since the early 1990s under the Private University Act of 1992 and subsequent legislation, has largely abandoned the commitment to Bangla-medium instruction. Most private universities in Bangladesh, particularly those in Dhaka's wealthier areas, use English as the medium of instruction, at least officially, positioning themselves as providers of international-standard education and competing with international university programs for the most affluent segments of the student population. The reality in many of these institutions is, again, a complex bilingual practice in which English is the official language of the curriculum but Bangla is extensively used in actual teaching interactions, but the aspiration is toward English-medium instruction and the credential it is perceived to confer.

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The situation in higher education thus represents a stark contradiction between the constitutional and political commitment to Bangla as the national language and the academic and economic pressures that push Bengali-educated students toward English. Students who enter higher education from the Bangla-medium secondary system may find themselves at a significant disadvantage in private universities where English is the primary medium of instruction, while students who enter from the English-medium secondary system may find the public universities' Bangla-medium tradition unfamiliar and limiting. The language divide in education thus continues to reproduce itself at the tertiary level, with those who have been able to access English-medium schooling finding it significantly easier to access the most valued forms of higher education and the employment opportunities they lead to.

Chapter Four: The English Question -- Colonial Legacy, Economic Necessity, and the Politics of Linguistic Capital

4.1 The Historical Roots of English's Position in Bangladesh

English arrived in Bengal not as a neutral instrument of international communication but as the language of colonial power. The Macaulayan educational project of the nineteenth century, which we examined in the historical chapters of Part One, established English as the language of education for the elite intermediary class that colonial administration required. English was not merely taught as a subject but was made the medium through which access to government employment, the professions, and the modern institutional world was controlled. To know English was to have access to power. To lack English was to be excluded from it.

The independence of both India and Pakistan in 1947 and of Bangladesh in 1971 did not alter this fundamental structure. The colonial bureaucratic infrastructure, the legal system, the university system, and the institutional world of the professions all continued to operate predominantly in English. The political rhetoric of Bengali nationalism insisted on the primacy of Bangla, but the institutional reality of the state apparatus, the courts, the military, the professions, and the corporate sector continued to give enormous advantage to those with English competence. The Language Movement of 1952 asserted the right of Bengali speakers to use their own language in public life, but it did not and could not immediately transform the deep institutional structures that gave English its privileged position.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "linguistic capital" is useful here. For Bourdieu, language competence is not merely a communicative resource but a form of capital, analogous to economic and social capital, which can be accumulated and exchanged for material and symbolic advantage in various social fields. In Bangladesh, English proficiency functions as a particularly powerful form of linguistic capital, one that is unequally distributed across the population in ways that closely track the distribution of economic and social privilege more broadly. Those who attended English-medium schools, or who come from families where English is present at home, possess a form of capital that gives them systematic advantage in the competition for desirable jobs, for access to international education, and for participation in the elite social circles where English is the normal medium of sophisticated social interaction.

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Research published in 2024 and 2025, using Bourdieu's framework in the specific context of Bangladesh, has documented with striking clarity how this dynamic operates. The three-tiered educational system, comprising English-medium, Bangla-medium, and Madrasa streams, functions as a mechanism for the reproduction of social inequality: English-medium graduates disproportionately occupy the corporate private sector, the international NGO world, and the professional elite, while Bangla-medium graduates are concentrated in the public service, the informal sector, and the lower tiers of formal employment. The structural effect is that the language in which a child is educated largely determines the social class she will occupy as an adult, regardless of her individual ability or effort. This is a profound injustice, and it is a injustice that has been consistently obscured by a political discourse that treats the Bengali-medium system as adequate for the needs of the majority while allowing the English-medium system to function as a private solution for those with the means to access it.

4.2 The Structure of English Medium Education in Bangladesh

English-medium education in Bangladesh is provided through a complex and largely unregulated private sector that serves approximately one to three percent of the total school-age population, concentrated overwhelmingly in Dhaka, Chittagong, and a small number of other urban centers. The sector comprises several distinct types of institution with significantly different characteristics and social compositions.

At the apex of the system are the high-fee private schools that follow international curricula: primarily the Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE) system, with its O-level and A-level examinations, and to a lesser extent the Pearson Edexcel system, the Oxford International AQA system, and the International Baccalaureate (IB). These schools charge annual fees that may range from one hundred thousand to over five hundred thousand Bangladeshi taka or more, placing them accessible only to the wealthiest families. Their graduates are positioned, in terms of educational qualifications, for entry to universities in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and other English-speaking countries, as well as to the private universities in Dhaka that accept international qualifications.

Below this apex tier is a larger and more heterogeneous set of English-medium institutions of varying quality and fee levels. Some of these follow the Cambridge curriculum in a less rigorous way, while others have developed hybrid approaches that draw on elements of the national curriculum but deliver instruction primarily or substantially in English. The quality of these institutions varies enormously, from genuinely excellent schools with qualified teachers and adequate facilities to low-quality schools that use the English-medium label primarily as a marketing device while providing instruction of dubious quality in a mixture of English and Bangla.

A third category, which blurs the boundary between English-medium and Bangla-medium education, is the "English version" school, which provides the national curriculum in translation, using textbooks translated from Bangla into English but following the same syllabus and examinations as the Bangla-medium system. The English version system was introduced through government cadet colleges in the late 1990s and has expanded significantly since then, with approximately three hundred and fifty primary schools offering English version programs as of

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recent estimates. This system represents an attempt to provide some degree of English-language education while maintaining the connection to the national curriculum, but research suggests that its outcomes are often poor because the translated textbooks are of limited quality, the teachers are often not adequately trained to deliver instruction in English, and the pedagogical approach remains as teacher-centered and examination-focused as the Bangla-medium system.

4.3 The Politics of English in Post-2024 Bangladesh

The political landscape for English language education changed significantly with the political revolution of August 2024 and the establishment of the interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. The student-led uprising that brought down Sheikh Hasina's government was in significant part a revolt against the inequalities and corruption of a system that had benefited a narrow elite while leaving the majority without genuine opportunity. The language question is directly implicated in this revolt, because the English-medium system is one of the most visible expressions of the educational privilege that accrues to the wealthy elite, and the inadequacy of English education in the Bangla-medium system is one of the most concrete expressions of the educational disadvantage that falls on the majority.

The Yunus interim government has signaled commitments to reform across multiple dimensions of the educational system, and the language question has been part of this reform agenda. There have been discussions about making quality English language education more accessible across the system, about improving the training of English teachers in government schools, and about revisiting the curriculum framework to ensure that the English language competencies specified in the curriculum are actually achievable given the resources available to most schools. However, the depth of structural reform that the language situation requires has not yet been addressed with the seriousness it demands. The fundamental inequity of a system in which access to quality English education is effectively determined by family income has not been resolved, and the political challenges of addressing it are formidable.

4.4 Communicative Language Teaching and Its Failure in Bangladesh

Any serious analysis of the English language situation in Bangladesh must engage with the story of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the pedagogical approach that was adopted as the framework for English teaching reform in the mid-1990s and that has dominated official English language education policy in Bangladesh for three decades, despite persistent evidence that its implementation has been inadequate and its outcomes have been poor.

Communicative Language Teaching, developed in the United Kingdom and North America in the 1970s and 1980s, represents a fundamental shift from the grammar-translation methods that had previously dominated foreign language instruction. Where grammar-translation focused on the analysis of grammatical structures and the translation of literary texts, CLT emphasizes the development of communicative competence: the ability to use the target language effectively in real communicative situations. CLT pedagogies emphasize interaction, task-based learning, meaningful communication, and the development of all four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) rather than focusing primarily on reading and writing as grammar-translation approaches had done.

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The adoption of CLT as the framework for English language teaching reform in Bangladesh was a direct result of the influence of international development organizations, particularly the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and the British Council, which provided technical assistance and funding for the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) in the 1990s and subsequent programs. The CLT approach was incorporated into a new national curriculum for English and into new teacher training programs designed to equip primary and secondary teachers with the skills needed to implement it.

The results of this reform effort have been extensively studied and consistently disappointing. Research conducted over the past two decades has documented a substantial gap between the communicative curriculum that was officially adopted and the teacher-centered, grammar-focused, examination-driven practices that actually prevailed in most classrooms. Several structural factors account for this gap. First, the teacher training provided was inadequate in scale and quality: a brief training course cannot transform the deep-seated pedagogical habits of teachers who were themselves taught through grammar-translation methods and who have been teaching those methods for years. Second, the assessment system provided no incentive for communicative teaching, because the examinations by which students were ultimately judged continued to test grammar and translation rather than communicative competence. Third, the class sizes, resource constraints, and time pressures of Bangladesh's schools made the kind of interactive, communicative teaching that CLT requires extremely difficult to implement. Fourth, and perhaps most fundamentally, teachers' own English proficiency was in many cases insufficient to conduct their classes in English, let alone to model and facilitate authentic communicative interaction in the language.

The failure of CLT in Bangladesh is not simply a story of bad implementation. It is a story of institutional and systemic mismatch: the importation of a pedagogical approach developed in and for specific social and institutional conditions into a context where those conditions were absent and could not be quickly created. The lesson is one that applies across Bangladesh's educational reform landscape, not only in language education: reform approaches that work in one context cannot simply be transplanted to another context without the deep contextual analysis and adaptation that sustainable reform requires.

4.5 English Proficiency Data and the Evidence of Failure

The evidence on English language proficiency in Bangladesh is, from any perspective, deeply troubling. Multiple surveys, assessment studies, and independent research projects have documented that the average level of English proficiency among graduates of Bangladesh's Bangla-medium secondary schools is very low: sufficient for basic recognition tasks but far below the level needed for effective communication in the professional environments where English is expected, let alone for participation in international academic discourse. The examination in English at the SSC and HSC levels, which should be the quality control mechanism for English learning, has been affected by the same grade inflation dynamics that have affected the system as a whole, meaning that high grades in English on these examinations do not reliably correspond to genuine English language proficiency.

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A 2024 study using Bourdieu's symbolic power framework and analyzing media content, policy documents, and job advertisements found that the valorization of "standard" English, meaning a form of English associated with elite education, creates linguistic hierarchies that mirror colonial legacies. The study found that the form of English spoken and written by graduates of the elite English-medium schools was valorized over the forms spoken by graduates of the Bangla-medium system or of lower-fee English-medium institutions, even when the communicative content of what was being expressed was similar. This valorization of elite English varieties is not simply a matter of technical linguistic competence: it is a mechanism of social distinction and exclusion that uses linguistic criteria to enforce class boundaries in the labor market.

The crisis of English language education in Bangladesh is therefore not primarily a crisis of pedagogy, although pedagogical improvement is urgently needed. It is a crisis of equity: a crisis in which the existing structure of English language education systematically advantages those who are already advantaged and systematically disadvantages those who are already disadvantaged. Any serious reform of English language education must grapple with this equity dimension as its primary challenge.

Chapter Five: The Three-Tier System and Its Social Consequences

5.1 The Architecture of Inequality: How the Three Tracks Function

Bangladesh's educational system, viewed through the lens of language, comprises three distinct tracks that are not simply different in their content but profoundly different in what they offer to their students in terms of economic opportunity, social mobility, and civic identity. These three tracks are the Bangla-medium general education stream, the English-medium private school stream, and the Madrasa education stream. Their coexistence without genuine equivalence or mutual recognition constitutes one of the most serious structural problems in the entire educational landscape.

The Bangla-medium general education stream serves the large majority of Bangladesh's students, approximately sixty to sixty-five percent of the total school enrollment. It follows the national curriculum designed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), uses Bengali-language textbooks provided free of charge by the government, and prepares students for the public examinations of the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) boards. It is the system that receives the most direct government investment in terms of teacher salaries, school infrastructure, and curriculum development. It is also the system that produces outcomes which, as documented throughout this commentary, fall far short of what is needed: literacy and numeracy skills that are inadequate for effective participation in the modern economy, English language proficiency that is limited, and critical thinking skills that the examination-focused pedagogy of the system systematically suppresses.

The English-medium stream serves a small minority of students, concentrated in the urban upper and upper-middle classes, who access private schools that use English as the medium of instruction, whether following the Cambridge CAIE curriculum or one of the other international

frameworks available. This stream produces graduates with significantly higher English language proficiency, with international qualifications that open access to elite universities abroad, and with the social networks and cultural capital that elite private school education confers. The cost of this stream is prohibitive for the vast majority of Bangladesh's families: annual school fees may reach or exceed the annual income of a median Bangladeshi household. The equity implications are stark: the educational outcomes that the labor market most rewards are accessible only to those who can afford to pay for them, regardless of the academic ability of individual students.

The Madrasa stream, which serves approximately fourteen percent of Bangladesh's students, is itself internally divided between the Aliya Madrasa system, which follows a curriculum that includes both Islamic studies and some secular subjects and leads to examinations recognized by the state, and the Qawmi Madrasa system, which follows a curriculum focused almost exclusively on classical Islamic texts and whose qualifications were not formally recognized by the government until 2017. The language of the Madrasa stream is complex: the medium of instruction is Bengali, but the most important subjects are taught in Arabic (for the textual study of the Quran and Hadith) and in Arabic and Urdu (for the study of classical Islamic texts in the Dars-i-Nizami curriculum). Graduates of the Madrasa system have high proficiency in Quranic Arabic but typically low proficiency in the forms of English and scientific and technical knowledge that the formal labor market requires, limiting their economic options primarily to religious occupations and the informal sector.

5.2 Social Stratification and Linguistic Capital: The Bourdieusian Analysis

The three-track structure of Bangladesh's educational system is a machine for the reproduction of social inequality, and language is the central mechanism through which this reproduction operates. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "field," "capital," and "habitus" provide the most powerful analytical framework for understanding how this works.

In Bourdieu's framework, different social fields, including the field of education, the economic field, the field of culture, and the field of politics, have their own specific forms of capital that confer advantage on those who possess them. Linguistic capital, the ability to use the dominant language or languages of a field effectively, is a particularly important form of capital because it mediates access to all other forms of capital. In Bangladesh, English proficiency is an exceptionally powerful form of linguistic capital because it opens access to the most lucrative and prestigious sectors of the economy, to international educational and professional networks, and to the social circles of the national elite.

The distribution of English linguistic capital in Bangladesh is structured by the three-track educational system in ways that closely reproduce the existing distribution of economic capital. Families with high economic capital can purchase high-quality English-medium education for their children, thereby providing them with the English linguistic capital that maintains and potentially enhances their advantaged position. Families with low economic capital, confined to the Bangla-medium system, cannot provide their children with the English linguistic capital needed to access the most advantaged positions, regardless of the children's academic ability. The result is a system in which the association between economic privilege and educational

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opportunity is perpetuated across generations, with the language of education functioning as the primary mechanism of this perpetuation.

The 2024 research that documented English-medium graduates securing ninety-three percent of corporate positions is a powerful empirical illustration of this dynamic. It means that the corporate economy of Bangladesh is effectively a closed world for graduates of the Bangla-medium system, regardless of their qualifications, their skills, or their intelligence. The language barrier functions as a credential barrier, and the credential barrier functions as a class barrier. The result is a form of structural injustice that is all the more insidious for being naturalized: it appears as if the inequality of outcomes between English-medium and Bangla-medium graduates reflects a difference in ability or effort, when in fact it reflects the differential allocation of educational resources that the three-track system perpetuates.

5.3 The Madrasa System: A Third World of Language

The Madrasa system's linguistic situation deserves separate and careful analysis, because it is the most complex and the least understood element of the overall language picture. The student who enters a Qawmi Madrasa is entering a linguistic environment that is simultaneously Bengali (the medium of daily life and of some instruction), Arabic (the language of the Quran, of hadith, and of classical Islamic scholarship), and in many cases Urdu (the language of many important texts in the Dars-i-Nizami curriculum and the historical language of Indian Muslim scholarship). This multilingual environment is not simply a complication of the student's educational experience: it is constitutive of the educational project of the Madrasa, which aims to form students who are at home in the classical Islamic textual tradition and who can engage with Islamic knowledge in the languages in which that knowledge has historically been produced.

The pedagogical challenges of this multilingual environment are formidable. Most students who enter Madrasa education do so from Bengali-speaking homes with little or no prior exposure to Arabic or Urdu. The acquisition of Arabic in the Madrasa context is primarily oriented toward the ability to read and recite classical texts rather than toward communicative competence in spoken Arabic: a Madrasa graduate who has spent many years studying Arabic may be able to read and explicate complex classical texts with considerable sophistication while being unable to hold a simple conversation with a contemporary Arabic speaker from the Arab world. This situation is not unique to Bangladesh: it is characteristic of traditional religious education in Arabic throughout the non-Arab Muslim world, and it reflects the fact that classical Arabic and contemporary spoken Arabic are significantly different linguistic systems.

The relationship between the Madrasa system and the general educational system on the language dimension has been a source of persistent tension. Governments have attempted, with limited success, to persuade the Qawmi Madrasa system to incorporate more secular subjects, including Bengali language and literature, mathematics, science, and English, into their curriculum. The resistance of the Qawmi leadership to these attempts is partly a question of curriculum philosophy, reflecting a genuine belief that the inclusion of secular subjects would dilute the religious orientation of the education and compromise the transmission of the classical Islamic tradition. But it also reflects a practical concern about resources: adding new subjects to

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an already full curriculum requires additional teaching time, additional teachers, and additional materials, all of which are scarce in the resource-constrained Qawmi Madrasa sector.

The recognition of Qawmi Madrasa qualifications by the Sheikh Hasina government in 2017, granting equivalence to the Dawra Hadith, the highest degree of the Qawmi system, with a master's degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies, was a significant political and educational development. It represented an attempt to bring the Qawmi system into a more formal relationship with the state educational framework while respecting its distinctive educational tradition. But the recognition has not resolved the underlying language problem: a student who has completed the Qawmi curriculum has very high Arabic and Islamic knowledge competencies and typically very low competencies in English and in the secular sciences, making it extremely difficult to pursue further education in the general university system or to access the formal economy in anything other than religious roles. The language of the Madrasa is, in this sense, not a bridge to wider opportunity but a container that limits the economic and social horizons of its graduates, however excellent their religious education may be.

Chapter Six: Indigenous Languages and the Educational Rights of Linguistic Minorities

6.1 The Scale of the Problem

Bangladesh is a country of remarkable linguistic diversity. Alongside the Bengali-speaking majority that comprises approximately ninety-eight percent of the population, the country is home to over fifty-four recognized indigenous peoples speaking at least thirty-five languages, with some estimates putting the number of distinct indigenous languages significantly higher. According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census, the country's indigenous population numbers approximately 1.65 million, representing about one percent of the total population, though indigenous advocacy organizations claim a figure closer to four million.

The geographic distribution of the indigenous population creates two distinct educational situations. Approximately eighty percent of the indigenous population lives in the plains districts of the north and southeast of the country, including the Santal, Oraon, Munda, Rajbongshi, Koch, and many other communities, where they are a dispersed minority within a predominantly Bengali-speaking environment. The remaining twenty percent lives in the three hill districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban), where they constitute the historical majority of the population but have been progressively reduced toward numerical parity with Bengali settlers through the settlement programs of the 1970s and 1980s.

The educational situation of indigenous children in both regions is characterized by the same fundamental problem: they enter school speaking a language other than Bengali as their mother tongue and are required to acquire both Bengali and new academic knowledge simultaneously, through the medium of a language they do not yet command. The research evidence on the educational consequences of this situation is consistent and troubling. Indigenous children who begin their schooling without any prior exposure to Bengali face significant difficulties in comprehension, engagement, and academic progression. The result is lower academic

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achievement, higher repetition rates, and higher dropout rates among indigenous students compared to their Bengali-speaking peers, patterns that have been consistently documented across research studies including a comprehensive study published in the IOSR Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences in December 2024.

6.2 The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Program: Achievements and Limitations

The introduction of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program in 2017, which we have mentioned in earlier sections, represents the most significant policy response to the language situation of indigenous students in the history of independent Bangladesh. The program, developed under the National Education Policy 2010's commitment to mother-tongue-based education for linguistic minorities, produced pre-primary textbooks in five indigenous languages: Chakma, Marma, Kokborok (Tripura), Garo, and Sadri. These textbooks were distributed to pre-primary classes in schools serving indigenous communities, aiming to provide children with initial literacy instruction in their mother tongue before transitioning to Bengali-medium instruction in subsequent years.

The program represents genuine and significant progress, and it deserves recognition as such. It is the first time in the history of Bangladesh's education system that indigenous languages have been used in formally produced state educational materials, and the symbolic importance of this recognition cannot be understated. For communities whose languages have been systematically marginalized and whose educational rights have been systematically neglected, the production of textbooks in their languages is a meaningful affirmation of their dignity and their right to education.

But the limitations of the program are equally significant and have been extensively documented by indigenous education advocates, researchers, and international organizations. First, the program covers only five languages out of the thirty-five or more indigenous languages spoken in Bangladesh. The thirty or more communities whose languages were not included in the program received no benefit from the reform and continue to face the same disadvantage they faced before it. The selection of the five languages that were included was driven partly by practical considerations of scale and resource constraints, but it has also created a hierarchy among indigenous communities, with those fortunate enough to have their language included receiving some recognition while others continue to be invisible in the official educational framework.

Second, the program covers only the pre-primary level. After the one year of pre-primary education in the mother tongue, indigenous children enter primary school in a Bengali-medium environment for which the single year of pre-primary instruction has not adequately prepared them. The research literature on mother-tongue-based multilingual education consistently shows that the benefits of MTB-MLE programs are greatest when the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction for the first three to five years of schooling, with a gradual and supported transition to the dominant language of wider communication. A single year of pre-primary instruction is insufficient to provide the cognitive and linguistic foundation that children need for successful transition to a second-language medium of instruction.

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Third, and most critically, the program was implemented without adequate provision of trained teachers. The pre-primary textbooks were produced and distributed, but the supply of teachers who are proficient in the relevant indigenous languages and trained in MTB-MLE pedagogical approaches was not developed in parallel. Schools were given textbooks in languages that their teachers could not read or teach, and in many cases the materials were left unused because there was no one available to use them. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education produced pre-school textbooks in five indigenous languages and distributed approximately twenty-five thousand books, but indigenous activists have consistently identified the lack of adequate, competent, and qualified teachers in indigenous languages as the critical gap in the program's implementation.

6.3 The Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Special Case

The situation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts requires particular attention because its educational dimensions are inseparable from the political and historical context of indigenous rights, armed conflict, the 1997 Peace Accord, and the ongoing violation of indigenous peoples' rights in the region. This is not simply a matter of language pedagogy: it is a matter of political justice, constitutional rights, and the responsibilities of the state toward communities it has historically oppressed.

The CHT is home to eleven distinct indigenous ethnic groups, collectively known as the Jumma peoples, including the Chakma, the Marma, the Tripura, the Tanchangya, the Mro, the Lushai, the Khumi, the Chak, the Khiyang, the Bawm, and the Pangkhua. These communities speak languages belonging to several different language families and have maintained distinct cultural identities for centuries. The region was historically governed under a special regulatory framework, the CHT Regulation of 1900, which recognized the distinctive character of the region and provided for a degree of indigenous self-governance through the traditional authority of the three Circle Chiefs.

The armed conflict that began in the 1970s, between the Bangladesh military and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) representing the indigenous peoples, lasted until the signing of the CHT Peace Accord in December 1997. The accord recognized the CHT as a "tribal-inhabited region" and provided for the establishment of the CHT Regional Council and three Hill District Councils as mechanisms of indigenous self-governance, with some authority over education, land, and other matters. But the implementation of the accord has been woefully inadequate, as consistently documented by international observers, UN bodies, and indigenous rights organizations. The military presence in the CHT remains heavy; land rights promised under the accord have not been restored; and the institutions of indigenous self-governance have not been given the resources and powers necessary to function effectively.

In this context, the educational situation of indigenous children in the CHT is shaped not only by the general problems of MTB-MLE implementation but by the specific dynamics of a militarized environment in which indigenous cultural rights are systematically suppressed. The Bengali settlement programs of the 1979 to 1983 period, which brought an estimated four hundred thousand plainland Bengali settlers into a region with a indigenous population of similar size, transformed the demographic and political landscape of the CHT and created permanent tensions

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over land, resources, and cultural survival that continue to shape every aspect of life in the region, including education.

The removal by the NCTB in January 2025 of an artwork containing the word "Adivasi" (Indigenous) from the back cover of the ninth and tenth-grade Bangla Grammar and Composition textbook, following pressure from a group of Islamic organizations, and the violent response by security forces to the peaceful protest of indigenous students against this removal, is emblematic of the deeply hostile political environment that indigenous communities face. The incident provoked a letter of concern from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and was raised at the fifty-eighth session of the UN Human Rights Council in February 2025. It illustrates, with painful clarity, that the language question in the CHT is not merely a matter of pedagogical choice but a contested terrain in which the very identity and rights of indigenous peoples are at stake.

The educational situation of Bawm communities in Bandarban district has been additionally complicated by the detention in April 2024, without due process and apparently without adequate legal justification, of one hundred and twenty-six Bawm individuals including thirty women and three children, a situation that international human rights organizations have raised with urgency at multiple UN forums. The death in custody in May 2025 of a twenty-nine-year-old Bawm youth, Lal Tleng Kim Bawm, drew particular international condemnation and illustrated the human cost of the militarization of the CHT. In an environment of state repression and impunity, indigenous children's right to education in their mother tongue and their right to cultural survival are inextricably linked with the broader struggle for indigenous rights and human dignity.

6.4 International Legal Framework: The Rights of Linguistic Minorities in Education

The rights of linguistic minorities in education are well established in international law, and Bangladesh's obligations under this framework are clear and binding. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which Bangladesh ratified, requires states to ensure the right to education without discrimination on grounds of language, and to make primary education compulsory and freely available to all. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), also ratified by Bangladesh, requires states to ensure that the child of a minority community has the right, in community with other members of her group, to use her own language. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), to which Bangladesh has expressed support, explicitly recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Bangladesh ratified in 2000, contains in Article Twenty-Seven the explicit provision that "In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language." This provision is directly applicable to the situation of Bangladesh's indigenous linguistic minorities, and Bangladesh's compliance with it in the educational domain is significantly inadequate.

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International organizations including Minority Rights Group, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission have consistently called on Bangladesh's government to comply with these international legal standards, to fully implement the CHT Peace Accord of 1997, and to take concrete measures to protect the educational rights of indigenous linguistic minorities. These calls have been consistently made to both the Hasina government before August 2024 and to the Yunus interim government since then. The response of both governments has been inadequate, suggesting that the political will to genuinely address the educational rights of linguistic minorities is lacking regardless of the political character of the government in power.

6.5 Comparative Perspectives: What Works in MTB-MLE Programs

The design of effective MTB-MLE programs has been extensively studied in comparable contexts across Asia and Africa, and the evidence on what works is relatively clear. Programs that have achieved significant success in improving educational outcomes for linguistic minority children share several common features that provide a template for reform in Bangladesh.

The most successful programs provide mother-tongue-based instruction for the first three to six years of schooling, with a gradual and explicitly planned transition to the dominant language of wider communication. They develop comprehensive curricula in the minority language, not just pre-primary materials but a full primary curriculum, with materials that are culturally grounded in the experience and knowledge of the community. They invest heavily in teacher training, both pre-service training of new teachers from the minority community and in-service training of existing teachers in MTB-MLE pedagogical approaches. They involve the communities themselves in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the program, recognizing that community ownership is essential for program success. And they develop robust assessment frameworks that allow students to demonstrate their learning in their mother tongue before being assessed in the dominant language.

Programs in the Philippines (the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education program introduced under the K-12 curriculum reform of 2012), in Papua New Guinea, in Ethiopia, in Guatemala, and in various states of India have demonstrated that MTB-MLE can be implemented at scale with significant positive effects on learning outcomes, attendance rates, and community engagement with education. The SHARE Education program in Bangladesh, which implemented MTB-MLE in the CHT with support from international donors, provided local evidence of the approach's effectiveness in the Bangladeshi context, achieving measurable improvements in literacy rates and attendance among indigenous children served by the program. The challenge now is to take these lessons and build them into a comprehensive national policy with adequate funding and institutional support.

Chapter Seven: Arabic in the Madrasa Tradition -- Language, Theology, and the Question of Modernity

7.1 The Sacred Language and Its Educational Role

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Arabic occupies a unique position in Bangladesh's linguistic and educational landscape. Unlike English, which is valued primarily for its economic and professional utility, and unlike the indigenous languages, whose value is primarily cultural and communal, Arabic's position in the Madrasa educational system is grounded in theology. For Muslim believers, Arabic is not simply a language: it is the language in which God chose to reveal the final and perfect message to humanity through the Prophet Muhammad. The Quran, in Muslim belief, can only truly exist in Arabic: translations are understood as interpretations or explanations of the Quran but not as the Quran itself. This theological claim gives Arabic a status in Islamic education that no other language can claim, and it grounds the intensive Arabic instruction of the Madrasa system in something deeper and more fundamental than educational policy or economic calculation.

The role of Arabic in the Madrasa curriculum reflects several centuries of pedagogical tradition in the Indian subcontinent, shaped particularly by the Dars-i-Nizami curriculum that was developed by Mulla Nizamuddin Sehhalvi at the Farangi Mahal seminary in Lucknow in the early eighteenth century and that has remained the foundational curriculum of Qawmi Madrasa education across Bangladesh, Pakistan, and parts of India to this day. The Dars-i-Nizami is a comprehensive program of study in the Islamic intellectual sciences, organized around the mastery of classical texts in Arabic and Urdu. Its graduates are expected to be able to read, understand, and comment upon the major texts of Islamic jurisprudence, theology, logic, rhetoric, and Arabic linguistics. This is an ambitious and rigorous educational program, and the students who complete it successfully have achieved a genuine and substantial scholarly formation in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

The educational philosophy underlying Arabic instruction in the Madrasa is the perennialist philosophy identified in Chapter One of Part One: the transmission of an enduring tradition through immersion in its canonical texts. The student who studies with a master scholar of Arabic grammar through the classical text of Mulla Jami's Kafiya, who reads the Mishkat al-Masabih with its chains of transmission and its legal commentary, who engages with the Hidaya of al-Marghinani as an introduction to Hanafi jurisprudence, is not simply acquiring information: she is being inducted into a way of thinking, a way of reading, and a way of relating to knowledge that has shaped Islamic civilization for a millennium. The value of this formation cannot be measured solely by the economic returns it generates or the employment opportunities it opens.

7.2 The Gap Between Classical Arabic and Contemporary Arabic

One of the most significant pedagogical problems of Arabic instruction in Bangladesh's Madrasa system is the gap between the Classical Arabic that is taught and the Modern Standard Arabic and spoken colloquial Arabic varieties that are used in the contemporary Arab world. Classical Arabic, the language of the Quran and of the medieval Islamic scholarly tradition, and Modern Standard Arabic, the formal written language used in contemporary Arab journalism, government, and public discourse, are related but distinct: a scholar who has mastered Classical Arabic can read Modern Standard Arabic with some difficulty but would not find it a natural transition, and the various spoken Arabic dialects of contemporary Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, and other Arab countries are different again, being significantly influenced

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by local vernacular features and relatively inaccessible to someone trained exclusively in Classical Arabic.

The practical consequence of this gap is that a Madrasa graduate who has studied Arabic for ten or more years may be able to read and expound classical Islamic texts with considerable skill while being unable to communicate effectively with Arabic-speaking immigrants in Dhaka's diplomatic and commercial community, to access modern Arabic-language digital resources and media, or to pursue opportunities for advanced Islamic education in contemporary Arab universities where Modern Standard Arabic is the medium of instruction. The Madrasa's Arabic instruction is highly specialized for a specific religious and scholarly purpose, and that purpose is served well, but the transferability of the Arabic competencies developed to other domains is limited.

This gap has important implications for the question of Madrasa graduates' employment options and social mobility. The skills developed through Madrasa education, including deep familiarity with Islamic texts, the ability to read and teach classical Arabic, facility with Islamic legal reasoning, and a thorough grounding in the principles of Islamic theology, are genuinely valuable for a range of religious and scholarly roles. But they transfer poorly to the secular economy, and the gap between the linguistic and cultural world of the Madrasa and the linguistic and cultural world of the secular formal economy is one of the most significant structural factors in the limited social mobility of Madrasa graduates.

7.3 Reform of Arabic Instruction: Debates and Directions

The reform of Arabic instruction in Bangladesh's Madrasa system is a contentious and sensitive question that intersects religious authority, cultural preservation, economic inclusion, and political calculation in ways that make straightforward reform difficult. Several directions of reform have been proposed and debated.

One direction, advocated by modernist Muslim intellectuals and by government education officials, is the introduction of contemporary communicative approaches to Arabic instruction that develop students' ability to use spoken and Modern Standard Arabic alongside their facility with classical texts. This would require significant changes in teacher training, curriculum design, and assessment, and would face resistance from scholars who believe that the classical approach is the pedagogically and theologically appropriate way to teach Arabic for Islamic learning.

A second direction, advocated by those concerned primarily with the employment outcomes of Madrasa graduates, is the integration of more secular subjects including English, mathematics, and natural science into the Madrasa curriculum, alongside the retention of Arabic and Islamic studies. This direction was partially implemented in the Aliya Madrasa system, which includes some secular subjects alongside Islamic studies, and the question of whether the Qawmi system should move in a similar direction has been debated for decades. The recognition of Qawmi qualifications in 2017 was intended partly as an incentive for the Qawmi sector to engage more seriously with curriculum reform, but the substantive integration of secular subjects into the Qawmi curriculum has not followed from the recognition.

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A third direction, less frequently discussed in Bangladesh's policy debates but important from the perspective of comparative Islamic educational reform, is the development of genuinely integrated curricula that bring classical Islamic learning and contemporary knowledge into dialogue, rather than simply adding secular subjects as an appendage to an otherwise unchanged religious curriculum. This approach, exemplified by institutions like the International Islamic University in Malaysia and by various reform experiments in the Arab world and Turkey, attempts to create educational programs in which Islamic and secular knowledge are not treated as separate domains to be balanced against each other but as integrated elements of a comprehensive understanding of human knowledge and its relationship to divine guidance. This is a philosophically ambitious project, and its implementation requires scholarly, pedagogical, and institutional resources that are rarely available, but it represents the most intellectually serious approach to the fundamental challenge of Islamic education in the contemporary world.

Chapter Eight: Comparative Analysis -- Language in Education Across South and Southeast Asia

8.1 The Regional Context: Language Diversity and Educational Policy

Bangladesh's language situation in education, while distinctive in its specifics, shares important features with the language situations of other multilingual postcolonial states in South and Southeast Asia. A comparative analysis of how neighboring and regional countries have grappled with similar questions of language in education provides important perspective on Bangladesh's choices, challenges, and potential directions of reform.

India's approach to language in education is the most immediately relevant comparator, given the historical, cultural, and geographic connections between Bangladesh and the Indian subcontinent and the shared experience of British colonial educational policy. India's linguistic situation is more complex than Bangladesh's: it has twenty-two officially recognized scheduled languages in addition to hundreds of other languages and dialects, and the question of which languages to use in education has been among the most contentious issues in Indian politics since independence. India's Three Language Formula, adopted as a national policy guideline in 1968 and reaffirmed with significant elaboration in the National Education Policy 2020, provides that students should learn three languages: their regional mother tongue, Hindi, and English. The implementation of this formula has been deeply uneven and politically contested, particularly in non-Hindi-speaking states where the mandatory teaching of Hindi is resisted as a form of linguistic imperialism by the Hindi-speaking north, but the formula at least provides a conceptual framework for managing multilingualism in education that Bangladesh lacks.

India's National Education Policy 2020 is particularly worth examining because it represents the most recent and comprehensive articulation of a major South Asian country's approach to language in education. The NEP 2020 makes several commitments that are directly relevant to Bangladesh's situation. It emphasizes that the medium of instruction at least until class five, and preferably until class eight, should be the home language, mother tongue, or local language, wherever possible. It commits to developing curricula and teaching materials in regional and

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tribal languages for foundational education. It recognizes that high-quality English language education is important for India's global competitiveness while insisting that this should be achieved through improved English teaching as a subject rather than through early-immersion English-medium instruction that disadvantages students from non-English-speaking homes. And it advocates for the development of a trilingual model that genuinely develops competencies in multiple languages rather than the superficial multilingualism that the previous Three Language Formula often produced in practice.

Bangladesh could learn much from India's NEP 2020's approach, while also taking note of the significant implementation challenges that India faces. The scale of investment required to produce high-quality teaching and learning materials in multiple languages, to train teachers capable of teaching in those languages, and to develop assessment frameworks that genuinely capture multilingual competencies is enormous. India's capacity to mobilize these resources is greater than Bangladesh's, and realistic reform ambitions in Bangladesh must be calibrated to the resource constraints under which the system operates.

8.2 Sri Lanka: The Lessons of Language Wars

Sri Lanka provides a cautionary example of what can happen when language policy in education is used as an instrument of ethnic politics rather than as a means of promoting educational quality and social inclusion. The decision of the Sri Lankan government in 1956 to replace English with Sinhala as the official language and medium of instruction in government schools, implemented through the "Sinhala Only Act," had profound consequences for the country's Tamil-speaking minority, who were effectively excluded from government employment and higher education by the requirement to use a language that was not their mother tongue in official contexts. The resulting sense of discrimination and marginalization among Tamil communities was one of the factors that contributed to the emergence of Tamil armed separatism and the civil war that devastated Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009.

The Sri Lankan experience illustrates with terrible clarity the dangers of using language policy as an instrument of ethnic majoritarianism. The imposition of a single dominant language as the exclusive medium of official and educational life, without adequate accommodation of the linguistic rights of minorities, is not merely an educational failure: it is a political failure that can generate violence, instability, and long-term suffering. The lesson for Bangladesh is not that Bangla should not be the dominant language of the educational system: of course it should be, given that it is the mother tongue of ninety-eight percent of the population. The lesson is that the accommodation of linguistic minorities, the recognition of their right to education in their own languages, and the protection of their cultural and linguistic rights must be genuine and not merely symbolic, because the alternative is the exclusion and resentment that are the seeds of social conflict.

8.3 Malaysia: Managed Multilingualism in a Diverse Society

Malaysia provides an interesting comparative case because of its success in managing a genuinely complex multilingual situation in education, while also illustrating the limitations of a top-down state approach to language policy. Malaysia's population comprises Malay-speaking

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Malays (the Bumiputera majority), Chinese-speaking Chinese Malaysians, Tamil-speaking Indian Malaysians, and numerous indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak, each with their own linguistic communities. The educational system has evolved to accommodate this diversity, if imperfectly: there are Malay-medium national schools, Chinese-medium national-type schools, Tamil-medium national-type schools, and various other arrangements, all operating within a national framework that also requires English language teaching.

Malaysia's approach has not been without controversy and conflict, particularly around the question of which medium should be used for science and mathematics teaching. The policy of using English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics (PPSMI), introduced in 2003 and reversed in 2012 after evidence that it was not improving outcomes and was disadvantaging students from non-English-speaking rural backgrounds, is a cautionary tale about the risks of mandating English-medium instruction in content areas without the teacher training and resource support needed to make it work.

The key lesson from Malaysia for Bangladesh is that genuine multilingualism in education is achievable but requires sustained, well-resourced commitment and careful management. The recognition of multiple language communities' rights to education in their own languages, combined with high-quality teaching of the national language and of English as an international language, can produce a more equitable and more effective educational system than one that formally commits to a single national language while allowing a privileged minority to access education in a different language entirely.

8.4 The Philippines and the MTB-MLE Experience

The Philippines provides the most directly relevant comparative example for Bangladesh's challenge of implementing mother-tongue-based multilingual education for a population that speaks numerous distinct languages. The Philippines has over 170 languages, and the implementation of its MTB-MLE policy under the K-12 curriculum reform has been one of the most ambitious educational language reform projects in Southeast Asian history.

The Philippines' K-12 MTB-MLE policy, implemented from 2012 onward, provides that children are taught in their mother tongue from kindergarten through grade three, with a gradual transition to Filipino and English from grade four onward. The policy covers nineteen mother tongue languages, with plans for expansion. It required the development of comprehensive teaching and learning materials in all covered languages, massive teacher training programs, and the development of assessment frameworks in the mother tongue languages. The implementation has been challenging, particularly in areas with numerous local languages, and there is ongoing debate about the quality and consistency of implementation across the country. But the evidence on outcomes is generally positive: children who have been taught in their mother tongue in the early grades show better learning outcomes across subjects than those taught in Filipino or English from the beginning.

Bangladesh can draw specific lessons from the Philippines' experience. The scale of the MTB-MLE challenge in Bangladesh is much smaller: with thirty-five or so indigenous languages as opposed to one hundred and seventy, the task of developing materials and training teachers is

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proportionally more manageable. The political economy of MTB-MLE reform in Bangladesh, however, is complicated by the specific sensitivity of the Chittagong Hill Tracts situation, by the lack of a strong indigenous languages constituency with political voice, and by the dominance of Bengali nationalism in the political culture, which creates resistance to anything that appears to challenge the primacy of Bengali. Navigating this political economy requires sophisticated policy design and political leadership that has been absent from the language reform agenda in Bangladesh.

Chapter Nine: Legal and Constitutional Dimensions of Language in Education

9.1 The Constitutional Framework

The constitutional framework within which language policy in Bangladesh's education system operates is both enabling and constraining. Article three of the Constitution, which establishes Bengali as the state language, has been interpreted to require Bengali-medium education in government schools and provides a constitutional basis for resisting demands for English-medium or other language instruction as a right. But the Constitution also contains provisions that are relevant to the rights of linguistic minorities and that have not been adequately engaged in educational policy debates.

Article twenty-eight of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of race, religion, caste, sex, or place of birth, but does not explicitly include language among the prohibited grounds of discrimination. This omission is significant: it means that discriminatory educational policies based on language do not face the same explicit constitutional prohibition as policies discriminatory on grounds of religion or sex, making it more difficult to challenge them through constitutional litigation. The absence of an explicit constitutional right to education in one's mother tongue for linguistic minority communities is a significant gap in the constitutional framework that has allowed the neglect of indigenous linguistic rights in education to continue without effective legal challenge.

The constitutional provisions relating to fundamental rights do, however, provide some basis for challenging extreme forms of linguistic discrimination in education. The right to equality before the law (Article twenty-seven), the right to protection from discrimination (Article twenty-eight), and the right to freedom of expression (Article thirty-nine, which includes the right to use one's own language) together create a framework within which the systematic exclusion of indigenous children from mother-tongue-based education could be challenged as a violation of constitutional rights. This argument has not yet been tested in Bangladesh's courts, and its prospects are uncertain in a legal culture where constitutional rights have often been interpreted in ways that privilege the interests of the majority community.

9.2 The Right to Education Act and Language

The Right to Free and Compulsory Primary Education Act 2010 established the legal right of every child to free and compulsory primary education, but did not include specific provisions

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relating to the language of instruction. This omission has significant practical consequences: the act does not require the government to provide primary education in the mother tongue of linguistic minority children, and it does not require the government to take steps to ensure that children who do not speak Bengali as their mother tongue can access primary education on genuinely equal terms with Bengali-speaking children.

The reform of the Right to Education Act to include language provisions would be an important step toward addressing the educational rights of linguistic minorities. A reformed act could require that primary education be provided in the child's mother tongue where feasible, that the government develop and implement MTB-MLE programs for indigenous language communities, and that the failure to provide mother-tongue-based education does not constitute adequate fulfillment of the state's obligation to provide quality primary education to all children. Such provisions would give legal force to the policy commitments already made in the National Education Policy 2010 and would create a framework for accountability and enforcement that is currently absent.

9.3 International Legal Obligations and Domestic Implementation

The gap between Bangladesh's international legal obligations on linguistic rights in education and its domestic implementation of those obligations is substantial and requires urgent attention. As we noted in Chapter Six, Bangladesh has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and various other international instruments that collectively establish robust rights to education in one's mother tongue and to protection from linguistic discrimination.

The mechanism through which Bangladesh's compliance with these obligations is monitored is the system of periodic reports to the UN treaty bodies, including the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and the Human Rights Committee. These bodies have consistently raised concerns about Bangladesh's treatment of linguistic minorities in education and have recommended that Bangladesh develop comprehensive MTB-MLE programs, train teachers in indigenous languages, and extend mother-tongue-based education beyond the pre-primary level. Bangladesh's responses to these recommendations have been largely inadequate, citing resource constraints and logistical challenges while failing to commit to specific timelines or targets for improvement.

The adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Bangladesh supported, strengthens the normative framework for indigenous linguistic rights in education. Article fourteen of UNDRIP explicitly recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. The implementation of this right in Bangladesh's CHT context would require a degree of genuine devolution of educational authority to indigenous community institutions that the current political framework has not been willing to contemplate.

9.4 Language Policy and the Rule of Law

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The relationship between language policy in education and the rule of law encompasses several dimensions that are not always recognized in policy debates. First, there is the dimension of legal certainty: clear, consistent, and predictable language policies, established through legislation and implemented through transparent administrative processes, are themselves a rule of law value. The current situation in Bangladesh, where language policy is set through administrative circulars, textbook decisions, and ministerial pronouncements that are subject to change with the political winds, creates uncertainty for families, institutions, and communities that is itself a form of governance failure.

Second, there is the dimension of equal protection under the law. A legal system that provides certain communities with the educational resources needed to participate effectively in economic and civic life while denying equivalent resources to other communities is not consistent with the principle of equal protection. The systematic inequality between the educational resources available to English-medium students and those available to Bangla-medium students, and between the educational resources available to Bengali-speaking and indigenous students, is not simply an educational problem: it is a rule of law problem, a failure to implement the constitutional commitment to equality in the educational domain.

Third, there is the specific rule of law dimension of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where the failure to implement the CHT Peace Accord of 1997, including its provisions relating to educational governance in the region, is a failure of the state to honor its legal commitments. The accord provides for a degree of indigenous self-governance including over education, and the consistent failure of successive governments to implement these provisions is a form of legal non-compliance that undermines the rule of law in the region and denies indigenous communities the educational authority to which they are legally entitled.

Chapter Ten: Toward a Democratic Language Policy for Bangladesh's Education

10.1 The Principles of a Democratic Language Policy

The analysis developed throughout this part establishes a clear framework for understanding what is wrong with the current language situation in Bangladesh's education and what a genuinely democratic, just, and educationally effective language policy would look like. A democratic language policy is one that is designed to serve the interests of all learners, not only those who already benefit from existing structural advantages. It is one that takes seriously the philosophical, pedagogical, and rights-based dimensions of language in education, not merely the economic and political dimensions. And it is one that is developed through genuine consultation with affected communities, including indigenous communities whose voices have been systematically excluded from policy processes, rather than imposed from above by a state that claims to know what is best for its citizens.

The first principle of a democratic language policy is the principle of educational effectiveness: language policy should be designed to maximize learning outcomes for all children. This means taking seriously the research evidence on the educational benefits of mother-tongue-based

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instruction in the early years of schooling, on the most effective approaches to developing second-language proficiency, and on the dangers of imposing a foreign medium of instruction on children who do not yet command it. It means resisting the temptation to use language policy for political or symbolic purposes when those purposes conflict with the educational interests of children.

The second principle is the principle of equity: language policy should reduce rather than perpetuate the educational inequalities that are rooted in linguistic background and economic privilege. This means taking serious action to extend quality English language education to children from all economic backgrounds, not merely to the children of the affluent. It means investing in MTB-MLE programs that genuinely equip indigenous children with the linguistic foundation they need for educational success. And it means addressing the structural features of the three-track system that make linguistic background one of the most powerful predictors of educational outcome in Bangladesh.

The third principle is the principle of recognition: language policy should recognize and affirm the linguistic rights of all communities, including indigenous linguistic minorities, rather than treating the promotion of Bengali as the exclusive priority of national language policy. Recognition does not require abandoning the primacy of Bengali: it requires acknowledging that Bangladesh is a country of linguistic diversity and that this diversity is a resource to be valued and protected rather than a problem to be managed away.

The fourth principle is the principle of democratic participation: language policy should be developed through processes that include the meaningful participation of affected communities, including the indigenous communities whose educational rights are most at stake. The current process, in which language policy is made by central government officials in Dhaka with minimal consultation of the communities most directly affected, fails this standard. A democratic language policy process would include indigenous community representatives in the design and implementation of MTB-MLE programs, would consult with parents and communities across the linguistic spectrum in the design of language curriculum and pedagogy, and would create ongoing mechanisms for community feedback and accountability.

10.2 Specific Reform Priorities

Building on these principles, the following specific reform priorities emerge from the analysis developed throughout this part.

The first and most urgent priority is the expansion and strengthening of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education program. The program should be expanded from five languages to cover all the indigenous languages with significant numbers of school-age children, with a pragmatic and phased approach that builds on existing capacity while extending coverage systematically. It should be extended from the pre-primary level to cover the full primary cycle, providing at minimum three to five years of mother-tongue-medium instruction before transitioning to Bengali-medium. And it must be accompanied by comprehensive teacher training: the development of training programs for indigenous-language teachers, the recruitment

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of speakers of indigenous languages into the teaching profession, and the development of in-service support for teachers implementing MTB-MLE approaches.

The second priority is the reform of English language teaching across the Bangla-medium system. This reform must be realistic about what can be achieved: the goal is not to replicate the English proficiency of elite English-medium school graduates, which would require resources far beyond what is available to government schools. The achievable and important goal is to develop the genuine communicative English competencies that will allow students to function in the increasingly English-mediated formal economy, to access English-language digital resources and information, and to participate in international professional communities. Achieving this goal requires a shift from the current grammar-translation and examination-focused approach to English teaching toward a genuinely communicative approach, backed by substantive teacher training, appropriate materials, reduced class sizes, and examination reform that tests communicative competence rather than grammatical knowledge.

The third priority is the regulation and reform of the English-medium sector. The current situation, in which private English-medium schools operate with minimal oversight, providing high-quality education for the children of the affluent while the state educational system provides inadequate education for the majority, is both educationally and socially unacceptable. Reform should aim at bringing the English-medium sector into a more equitable relationship with the state system, potentially through mechanisms such as scholarship programs that enable talented students from Bangla-medium backgrounds to access English-medium education, requirements for English-medium schools to contribute to the development of English language teaching capacity in the state system, and quality assurance frameworks that apply consistent standards across all types of school regardless of their linguistic medium.

The fourth priority is the reform of the Madrasa system's language curriculum, with the specific aim of developing English language competencies alongside the maintenance of high-quality Arabic and Islamic learning. The development of genuinely competent English language teaching capacity within the Madrasa system would significantly improve the economic prospects of Madrasa graduates without requiring any dilution of the religious and classical learning that is the core purpose of the Madrasa education. This reform will require a different approach in the Aliya and Qawmi systems, given their different organizational structures and relationships to the state, and it will require sustained engagement with Madrasa leadership, scholars, and communities to develop approaches that are genuinely acceptable within the Madrasa's own educational philosophy.

The fifth priority is the development of a comprehensive legal framework for language rights in education. This should include the amendment of the Right to Education Act to include explicit provisions for mother-tongue-based primary education for linguistic minority communities, the development of regulations governing the English-medium sector that ensure minimum quality standards and contribute to equity objectives, and the development of a statutory framework for the implementation of the linguistic provisions of the CHT Peace Accord. The legal framework should also include mechanisms for monitoring compliance and for enforcement, without which legal provisions risk remaining dead letters.

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10.3 The Role of Teachers in Language Reform

Any serious reform of language policy in education ultimately depends on teachers: on their linguistic competencies, their pedagogical skills, their professional commitments, and their cultural orientations. A language policy reform that is not grounded in a realistic assessment of what teachers can do, and that is not accompanied by investments in developing what teachers can do, is a reform that will remain on paper rather than entering the classroom.

The teacher dimension of language reform in Bangladesh is daunting. The English teaching workforce in government secondary schools is large but highly variable in quality: many English teachers have adequate grammatical knowledge of English but limited communicative proficiency, limited experience with communicative pedagogy, and limited access to the materials, technology, and professional support that would allow them to teach English more effectively. The in-service training system that is supposed to develop teacher capacity is itself inadequate in reach, quality, and frequency. And the pre-service teacher training that the Primary Training Institutes (PTIs) and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) provide gives insufficient attention to language pedagogy, particularly to the teaching of English as a foreign language and to the pedagogical approaches needed for bilingual and multilingual classrooms.

Developing the teacher workforce needed for a reformed language policy requires a long-term, sustained investment in professional development that goes well beyond the short training courses that have characterized Bangladesh's approach to teacher development. The research on effective teacher professional development, across international contexts, consistently shows that the most effective approaches are those that are sustained over time, connected to classroom practice, collegial and collaborative in their organization, and supported by institutional structures that allow teachers to implement what they are learning. The development of such approaches in the specific context of English language teaching and MTB-MLE implementation in Bangladesh is a substantial challenge, but it is not an impossible one, and the evidence from other countries shows that it can be done with the right political will and resource commitment.

10.4 Technology and Language in Education

The rapid development of digital technology has created new possibilities for language in education that were not available when most of Bangladesh's current language policies were designed. These possibilities are potentially highly relevant to several of the specific reform priorities identified in the previous section.

For English language teaching, digital technology offers access to authentic English language content, interactive language learning applications, and computer-mediated communication with English speakers, all of which can significantly supplement classroom instruction. The development of digital English language learning resources specifically designed for the Bangladeshi curriculum and cultural context could provide a cost-effective supplement to classroom instruction that is accessible to students across the economic spectrum, if the digital infrastructure needed to access it is in place. Bangladesh has made significant investments in digital education infrastructure under the Smart Bangladesh initiative, and this infrastructure

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could potentially be leveraged for language learning purposes in ways that go beyond the current applications.

For MTB-MLE programs, technology offers possibilities for developing indigenous-language educational resources at lower cost than traditional textbook production. Digital tools for script development, text-to-speech conversion, and multimedia content creation can potentially accelerate the production of teaching and learning materials in indigenous languages, reducing the time and cost barriers that have been cited as reasons for the slow expansion of the MTB-MLE program. The development of mobile phone applications for indigenous language learning and for supporting teachers implementing MTB-MLE, designed for low-bandwidth environments and accessible on low-cost devices, could also support the implementation of MTB-MLE in the geographically remote communities where it is most needed.

The caution that needs to be exercised in relation to technological solutions to language education challenges is the danger of technological substitution: the temptation to use technology as a substitute for the human relationships, teacher development, and institutional commitment that effective language education requires. Technology can support and amplify what good teachers and good schools do; it cannot substitute for them. The evidence from low-income countries that have experimented with technology-led approaches to English language teaching suggests that the outcomes are often disappointing precisely because the technology is used as a substitute for rather than a supplement to effective human teaching. Bangladesh's language education reforms must be centered on the development of teacher capacity and school quality, with technology serving in a supporting rather than a leading role.

10.5 Political Economy of Language Reform

The reform of language policy in education is, as this entire part has argued, a deeply political matter. It is political in the obvious sense that language policy is made by governments that have political interests, respond to political pressures, and seek political advantage. But it is political in a deeper sense as well: the existing language structure of Bangladesh's education system serves the interests of powerful groups who have the political resources to defend it, and any reform that genuinely addresses the language inequities of the system will encounter resistance from those groups.

The English-medium school sector and its clientele, the affluent urban professional and business families who depend on English-medium education to reproduce their social advantage, have a strong interest in maintaining the current arrangement. They are a small minority of the population but a highly influential one, with access to political leaders, to the media, and to the international networks that give their preferences disproportionate weight in policy debates. Reform that expands English language education across the system could be characterized as a threat to the quality of education their children receive, and this characterization could mobilize significant political opposition.

The Madrasa sector's leadership has a strong interest in maintaining the distinctiveness of Madrasa education, including its distinctive language structure, and will resist reforms that appear to secularize or westernize the Madrasa curriculum. The political influence of the

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Madrasa sector, including its ability to mobilize mass protest, has been demonstrated repeatedly in Bangladesh's political history and makes Madrasa-related education reforms extremely politically sensitive.

The indigenous rights community, which has the greatest stake in MTB-MLE reform, has the least political power. The indigenous population is a small minority, concentrated in geographically remote areas, politically marginalized by a state that has consistently refused to recognize their rights, and lacking the organizational capacity and political connections that would give their policy preferences effective weight. The political economy of language reform thus works systematically against the reforms that would most benefit the most disadvantaged: indigenous linguistic minorities who lack the political resources to advocate effectively for their interests.

Overcoming this political economy requires several things. It requires political leadership at the highest levels of government that is willing to recognize and address language inequities even when doing so involves resistance from powerful interest groups. It requires the development of civil society coalitions that can advocate effectively for language reform, including coalitions that bring together indigenous rights organizations, education reform advocates, and progressive voices within the academic and policy community. It requires the involvement of international organizations, including UNESCO, UNICEF, and international donor governments, in supporting language reform by providing technical assistance, documentation of best practices, and in some cases financial support for specific reform initiatives. And it requires patient, sustained engagement with the communities most affected by language inequities, building their capacity to advocate for their own rights and giving their voices genuine weight in policy processes.

Conclusion to Part Eight: Language, Justice, and the Future of Education in Bangladesh

The argument that this part has developed across its ten chapters can be stated simply, even though the evidence and analysis behind it is complex. Bangladesh's current language structure in education is unjust, ineffective, and inconsistent with the country's own constitutional commitments and international legal obligations. It is unjust because it systematically allocates the most valuable educational resource, quality English language education, according to economic privilege rather than educational merit or social need. It is ineffective because it fails to provide indigenous children with the linguistic foundation they need for educational success, fails to develop English language competencies that are genuinely useful for the majority of students, and fails to integrate the Madrasa sector's linguistic formation with the broader educational and economic opportunities available in the country. And it is inconsistent with Bangladesh's commitments because the constitutional primacy of Bengali, the legal right to education, and the international human rights framework all point toward an educational system that is linguistically more inclusive, more equitable, and more respectful of linguistic diversity than the one that currently exists.

The good news is that the direction of necessary reform is clear, even if the path to that reform is difficult. Expand and strengthen the MTB-MLE program for indigenous communities. Invest seriously in English language teaching capacity across the Bangla-medium system. Regulate and reform the English-medium private sector to reduce rather than perpetuate educational inequity. Develop English language competencies within the Madrasa system without diluting its distinctive religious and intellectual character. Build a comprehensive legal framework for language rights in education. And ground all of these reforms in a deep and sustained investment in teacher development, because no language policy reform will be worth anything if it is not implemented by teachers who understand what they are doing and have the competencies to do it well.

The bad news is that the political economy works systematically against these reforms, that the resource constraints are real and significant, and that the history of language education reform in Bangladesh is a history of well-intentioned policies inadequately implemented. Changing this history requires something more than better policy design, important as that is. It requires the kind of political will, sustained commitment, and social mobilization that transforms the deep structural inequities of a system that has, for too long, served the interests of the powerful at the expense of the rights and opportunities of the majority.

Bangladesh gave the world International Mother Language Day. It is time for Bangladesh to honor the spirit of the Language Movement by building an educational system that genuinely respects the right of every child to learn in a language she can understand, to develop the linguistic competencies she needs to participate fully in economic and civic life, and to carry her mother tongue and her cultural identity as a source of pride and strength rather than a mark of disadvantage. The children of Bangladesh, in all their linguistic diversity, deserve no less.

Supplementary Commentary on Translanguaging and the Contemporary Classroom

The rapidly developing field of translanguaging pedagogy has begun to generate practical applications for classrooms in multilingual low-income countries that are directly relevant to Bangladesh's language situation. Recent research from comparable South Asian contexts, particularly from Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Indian states of Jharkhand and Odisha, where multilingual indigenous populations face educational challenges similar to those of Bangladesh's CHT communities, has documented the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches that explicitly validate and draw upon the full multilingual repertoire of students rather than insisting on exclusive use of the official medium of instruction.

The practical implications of translanguaging for Bangladeshi classrooms are several. Teachers who use translanguaging approaches explicitly invite students to use all the linguistic resources available to them in their learning, including their mother tongue, their knowledge of other languages, and their experience of code-switching between languages in everyday life. This approach, which might seem to undermine the goal of developing proficiency in the official medium of instruction, in fact supports that goal by reducing the cognitive burden of simultaneous language acquisition and content learning, by building on students' existing

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knowledge base rather than requiring them to approach new content as if they had no relevant prior knowledge, and by creating a classroom culture of linguistic respect and inclusion that increases engagement and motivation.

The integration of translanguaging approaches into teacher training programs for both the general education system and the Madrasa system, and particularly for teachers working in linguistically diverse contexts, is an achievable and important reform that does not require large resources but does require a shift in pedagogical philosophy and a willingness to challenge the monolingual ideology that has dominated official language education policy in Bangladesh. It is one of the most cost-effective and immediately implementable directions of language education reform available, and it deserves serious attention from curriculum developers, teacher educators, and school administrators across the system.

Supplementary Commentary on the Arabic Question in the Context of Global Islamic Education Reform

The reform of Arabic language instruction in Bangladesh's Madrasa system needs to be understood in the context of broader global debates within the Islamic world about the relationship between classical Islamic learning and contemporary knowledge. These debates are active and substantive in Turkey, Malaysia, Qatar, Indonesia, and across the Arab world itself, and Bangladesh's engagement with them has been limited, primarily because the Qawmi sector's relative isolation from international Islamic academic discourse has prevented the productive exchange of ideas that could inform reform.

The Al-Azhar University in Egypt, the oldest and most prestigious institution of Islamic learning in the world, underwent significant curriculum reform in the twentieth century and continues to evolve in the twenty-first, attempting to integrate classical Islamic sciences with contemporary knowledge in ways that maintain the integrity of the Islamic scholarly tradition while producing graduates capable of engaging with the contemporary world. The experience of Al-Azhar, with its successes and its limitations, offers valuable lessons for Bangladesh's Madrasa reform.

The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), established in 1983 with the explicit mission of integrating Islamic and secular knowledge within a unified educational vision, offers another model. IIUM has developed degree programs in which Islamic studies and secular disciplines, including law, economics, and the natural sciences, are taught as an integrated whole, with each discipline understood as contributing to a comprehensive Islamic understanding of human knowledge. The model is philosophically ambitious and practically difficult, but it represents a serious attempt to address the fundamental challenge that all Islamic educational institutions face: how to maintain fidelity to the classical intellectual tradition while producing graduates who can engage with and contribute to the knowledge economy of the contemporary world.

Bangladesh's Madrasa reform debate would benefit enormously from deeper engagement with these international conversations and examples. The isolation of the Qawmi sector from

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international Islamic academic discourse is not only an educational limitation: it is a barrier to the kind of internal reform that the sector needs if it is to serve its students' full interests, religious, intellectual, and economic. Building bridges between Bangladesh's Madrasa scholars and the broader international Islamic intellectual community, supporting participation in international Islamic academic conferences, facilitating access to international Islamic scholarly resources, and enabling exchanges between Bangladeshi Madrasa scholars and their counterparts in Malaysia, Turkey, and the Arab world, would be a relatively low-cost but potentially high-impact investment in the conditions for Madrasa reform.

Supplementary Commentary on the Political Events of 2024 and Their Implications for the Language Question

The political revolution of August 2024, in which a student-led uprising brought down the government of Sheikh Hasina and established the interim government of Muhammad Yunus, has significant but as yet incompletely understood implications for the language question in education. The uprising was fundamentally about justice: about the demand for a fairer distribution of opportunity and power in a system that had become too concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite. The language structure of the education system is one of the most visible expressions of the unjust distribution of opportunity that the uprising was protesting.

The Yunus interim government has signaled a commitment to reform across multiple domains, including education. The signals on language education have been mixed. The removal of the word "Adivasi" from the NCTB textbook in January 2025, under pressure from Islamic organizations, and the violent response to the protest of indigenous students, suggests that the impulse toward indigenous rights recognition is not as strong in the interim government as the rhetoric of justice might have led one to hope. The government's attention to the language question has been focused primarily on the English language competency issue, reflecting the economic development priorities of the Yunus administration, rather than on the more politically challenging question of indigenous linguistic rights.

The reform of language policy in education requires the kind of political courage and sustained commitment that interim governments, focused on stabilizing a post-revolutionary situation and managing the immediate demands of economic crisis, are ill-positioned to provide. The risk is that language reform, like many other deep structural reforms, will be deferred to the post-interim period when a democratically elected government is in place, and that the elected government, facing the same political economy constraints that have limited language reform in the past, will once again find reasons to postpone the difficult choices that genuine reform requires.

The student movement that drove the August 2024 revolution, however, represents a new and potentially transformative force in Bangladesh's politics. The students who led the uprising were educated in Bangladesh's educational system, many of them in the Bangla-medium stream, and they brought with them a generational experience of the system's inadequacies and inequities. The language question, including the question of access to English language education and the

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question of the rights of indigenous students, is part of the broader educational equity agenda that the student movement embodies. If that movement can sustain its energy and its commitment to structural reform beyond the immediate political moment, it may provide the political foundation for the kind of language policy reform that this part has argued is urgently needed.

The conclusion of Part Eight sets the stage for Part Nine, which will examine the higher education system of Bangladesh in depth: the structure, governance, quality, and reform of the public and private university sectors; the role of international academic partnerships and the globalization of higher education; the research function of universities and its critical underdevelopment in Bangladesh; the relationship between higher education and the labor market; and the political economy of higher education expansion and reform in the context of the post-2024 political transition.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING FOR PART EIGHT

The following works inform the analysis developed in this part and are recommended for further study.

On the philosophy of language in education: Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Philosophical Investigations" (1953); Lev Vygotsky, "Thought and Language" (1934/1986); Ofelia Garcia and Li Wei, "Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education" (2014); Charles Taylor, "The Ethics of Authenticity" (1991); Will Kymlicka, "Multicultural Citizenship" (1995).

On language policy and English education in Bangladesh: The collected research of Mohammad Obaidul Hamid and colleagues, including "Language, Identity, and Social Divides: Medium of Instruction Debates in Bangladeshi Print Media" (Comparative Education Review, 2015); Mohammod Moninoor Roshid and Phan Le Ha, "Medium of education and the politics of distraction in school education in Bangladesh" (Current Issues in Language Planning, 2024-2025); and research published in Language in India (May 2025) on English in Bangladesh's education system.

On the historical development of language policy: the research synthesized in "Language Policy and English Education in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis" (International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, February 2024); and the foundational historical account in "Language Wars: English Education Policy and Practice in Bangladesh" (Multilingual Education, Springer, 2014).

On indigenous languages and MTB-MLE: the IWGIA reports on indigenous peoples in Bangladesh, including the written statement to the UN Human Rights Council (February 2025); research on educational disparities among CHT indigenous peoples published in IOSR Journals (December 2024); and the Wikipedia entry on the Chittagong Hill Tracts which provides a useful overview of the MTB-MLE program and its limitations.

On Islamic education and Arabic: the classical works of al-Ghazali ("Ihya Ulum al-Din"), Ibn Khaldun ("Muqaddimah"), and in the South Asian context, the works of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi; and contemporary scholarship on Islamic educational reform including the debates around Al-Azhar and the International Islamic University Malaysia.

On comparative language policy: India's National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Education, Government of India); UNESCO's position papers on Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education; and Suresh Canagarajah, "Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching" (Oxford University Press, 1999).

On the political economy of language in education: Pierre Bourdieu, "Language and Symbolic Power" (1991); and the recent Bangladeshi research applying Bourdieu's framework to analyze how English proficiency serves as linguistic capital in reinforcing social stratification, including studies drawing on data from 2022 to 2025 published in international journals.

Part Nine of this commentary will turn to Bangladesh's higher education system, examining the extraordinary expansion of the university sector since the 1990s, the governance crisis of public universities, the quality controversies surrounding private universities, the virtual absence of world-class research, and the complex politics of higher education reform in the post-2024 political landscape. It will draw on the philosophical and analytical frameworks established in Parts One through Eight to situate the higher education question within the broader account of Bangladesh's educational system and its deepest challenges.

PART NINE: THE ARCHITECTURE OF ASPIRATION

Higher Education in Bangladesh -- Expansion, Governance, Crisis, and the Possibility of Reform

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Prologue to Part Nine: The University and the Nation

There is an old and powerful idea, one that has animated the founding of universities from medieval Bologna and Oxford to colonial Dhaka, that the university is not merely an institution of learning but a mind of the nation. It is the place where a society thinks about itself, challenges itself, generates the knowledge it needs to renew itself, and prepares the people who will lead it into whatever future it is trying to build. When the University of Dhaka was established in 1921 on the pleasant lawns of Ramna, it was not simply an addition to the educational infrastructure of Bengal. It was a declaration by the Muslim leadership of east Bengal, led by figures like Sir Nawab Salimullah and A.K. Fazlul Haque, that their community had the intellectual aspiration and the political will to participate in the modern world of knowledge on their own terms. The University of Dhaka became, in the decades that followed, something more than a teaching

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institution. It became the intellectual cradle of Bengali Muslim nationalism, the site of the Language Movement of 1952, the crucible in which the political consciousness that would eventually produce an independent Bangladesh was formed and tested.

That history casts a long shadow over the contemporary condition of higher education in Bangladesh, and the shadow is not always illuminating. The university that once inspired a national movement has become, in the assessment of its most honest critics, a deeply troubled institution: politicized in its governance, compromised in its academic standards, inadequately resourced for its research mission, and structurally unable to produce the kind of education that the students who fill its lecture halls, and the society that funds it, genuinely need. The story of higher education in Bangladesh since independence is, in significant part, a story of how an institution with a remarkable intellectual heritage was progressively captured by the logic of patronage politics, how the dramatic expansion of the university sector from the early 1990s onward produced quantity without quality, and how the potential of higher education as an engine of economic development and a guardian of democratic culture has been systematically squandered.

But the story is not only one of failure and squandering. Bangladesh's universities have also produced remarkable scholars, professionals, scientists, and public intellectuals. Its best students, when they manage to access genuinely good education, often demonstrate intellectual abilities that compare favorably with students anywhere in the world. Its civil society, its journalism, its literature, and its political discourse all bear the marks of a university tradition that, at its best, has served the functions a university is supposed to serve. And the student uprising of July and August 2024, which overthrew an authoritarian government and created the conditions for a new political settlement, demonstrated once again that Bangladeshi students, in their collective capacity, retain something of the idealism, the courage, and the democratic instinct that has characterized the best moments of the country's student political history.

Understanding higher education in Bangladesh requires holding all of this in view simultaneously: the institutional failure and the intellectual promise; the structural crisis and the transformative potential; the capture by patronage and the resistance to it. This part of the commentary attempts that complex understanding, moving through philosophy, history, governance, economics, law, and comparative analysis to construct an account of what Bangladesh's higher education system is, why it is the way it is, and what would need to happen to make it something more adequate to the aspirations of the society it is supposed to serve.

Chapter One: Philosophical Foundations of the University -- What Higher Education Is For

1.1 The Classic Ideal and Its Contested Relevance

The philosophy of higher education is a domain of genuinely contested ideas, ideas that have been argued with great seriousness since the ancient Greek academies and that remain unresolved today precisely because they touch on the deepest questions about the relationship

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between knowledge, virtue, and social life. The classical ideal of the university, articulated most powerfully in the modern era by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his 1810 memorandum on the founding of the University of Berlin, holds that the university is a community of scholars united by the shared pursuit of truth through research and teaching. In this ideal, the university is not an instrument of any political, religious, or economic power: it is an autonomous community of inquiry whose integrity depends on its freedom from external determination. The Humboldtian university is defined by three principles: the unity of teaching and research (the idea that good teaching and serious research are not separable activities but mutually constitutive ones); academic freedom (the principle that scholars must be free to pursue inquiry wherever it leads, without fear of political or institutional interference); and the formation of the whole person through engagement with the full breadth of knowledge, not just with the technical skills required for a specific occupation.

The Humboldtian ideal has been enormously influential in shaping the self-understanding of universities around the world, and it continues to provide the normative framework within which contemporary debates about higher education reform are conducted. It is the ideal against which Bangladesh's public universities are most clearly failing, and it provides the philosophical foundation for the critique of politicization, of narrow vocationalism, of inadequate research, and of compromised academic freedom that runs throughout this chapter.

Newman's alternative formulation in "The Idea of a University" (1852) emphasized the liberal education of the whole person as the primary purpose of the university, even more explicitly than Humboldt. For Newman, the university's distinctive contribution is not research, which he associated with learned societies and academies rather than with teaching institutions, but the formation of the intellect through the broad cultivation of knowledge. The liberally educated person is not merely a specialist in a technical field: she is someone whose mind has been trained to think clearly, to engage with ideas across different domains, to argue carefully, and to exercise judgment. This is the formation that a genuinely good undergraduate education provides, and its value is not reducible to any specific occupation or social role.

Neither Humboldt nor Newman's vision is simply applicable to the contemporary situation of higher education in Bangladesh. Both were writing for a specific social context, one in which university education was confined to a small elite, in which the economy had not yet generated the mass demand for credentialed knowledge workers that characterizes the contemporary world, and in which the political economy of research funding, international academic publishing, and global knowledge production had not yet assumed its current form. The challenge of higher education philosophy in the contemporary world is to identify what is genuinely valuable in the classical ideals, what must be retained, and what must be adapted or supplemented in light of the very different circumstances of a mass higher education system in a developing country in the twenty-first century.

1.2 Human Capital Theory and the Instrumentalization of Higher Education

The dominant framework within which higher education policy has been made globally since the 1980s, and in Bangladesh since the early 1990s, is the human capital theory associated with economists Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker. In this framework, education is understood

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primarily as an investment in human productive capacity: individuals invest in education because it increases their earnings potential, and governments invest in education because it increases the productivity of the labor force and thereby promotes economic growth. Higher education, in this framework, is justified primarily by its contribution to economic productivity, and the design of higher education systems should be oriented toward maximizing the rate of return on this investment.

Human capital theory has been enormously productive as a framework for certain kinds of analysis and has generated genuine empirical insights about the relationship between education and economic development. The consistent finding across different countries and time periods that an additional year of higher education is associated with higher earnings provides strong evidence that higher education does indeed increase individual productive capacity and, by extension, contributes to aggregate economic productivity. The mobilization of this evidence by international development organizations including the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank has been enormously influential in shaping higher education policy in Bangladesh and in other developing countries.

The problems with human capital theory as a foundation for higher education policy are, however, substantial and have been extensively documented by critics from multiple disciplines. First, the theory systematically undervalues the non-economic dimensions of higher education: the cultivation of critical citizenship, the development of cultural life, the generation of basic scientific knowledge whose economic value may not be apparent for decades, the formation of intellectual communities that serve as guardians of democratic values, and the intrinsic human goods of understanding, curiosity, and intellectual development. A higher education system designed entirely around the goal of maximizing labor market returns will consistently neglect these dimensions, producing what the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has called a "crisis of the humanities" and a broader impoverishment of the democratic culture that higher education is supposed to sustain.

Second, human capital theory tends to treat the earnings premium associated with higher education as a measure of the productivity enhancement it produces, overlooking the substantial evidence that earnings differences between higher-educated and less-educated workers reflect not only genuine productivity differences but also credential signaling, social network effects, and the exercise of power by credentialed groups to restrict access to desirable occupations. In Bangladesh, where the earnings premium associated with elite English-medium higher education reflects in part the linguistic capital discussed in Part Eight rather than straightforwardly greater productive capacity, the human capital interpretation of educational earnings differentials is particularly questionable.

Third, human capital theory's focus on the individual returns to education tends to ignore the social returns and social costs of different patterns of higher education development. The rapid, unregulated expansion of private higher education in Bangladesh since the 1990s has generated large private returns for the investors who established private universities and for the graduates of the higher-quality private institutions, while producing a large number of graduates from lower-quality private institutions whose credentials have limited labor market value and who have invested significant family resources in education that has not delivered the promised

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returns. The social costs of this misallocation of educational investment are substantial, but they do not appear in a human capital framework that focuses on individual rather than social returns.

1.3 The University as Democratic Institution

A third philosophical perspective on higher education, one that is particularly relevant to Bangladesh's specific situation, understands the university not primarily as an institution of individual formation or as an engine of economic productivity, but as a democratic institution: a space in which the free inquiry and open debate that democratic societies require are modeled, cultivated, and protected.

John Dewey's democratic philosophy of education, applied to the university level, suggests that the university should be a learning community in which the habits of mind and conduct that democracy requires are developed through practice. The practice of free inquiry, in which claims are subjected to critical examination on the basis of evidence and argument rather than deferred to authority or tradition, is simultaneously the proper method of academic knowledge production and the epistemic foundation of democratic self-governance. The university that models this practice, that trains its students in the habits of evidence-based reasoning, respectful engagement with disagreement, and intellectual honesty, is making a contribution to democratic culture that cannot be reduced to its contribution to economic productivity.

This democratic dimension of the university's social function has a specific and urgent relevance to Bangladesh. The corruption of academic freedom in Bangladesh's public universities, the politicization of university governance, the subordination of scholarly integrity to partisan loyalty, and the culture of intellectual intimidation that has characterized university campuses under successive governments, are not only academic problems: they are democratic problems. A university system that does not model the practice of free inquiry and honest debate is failing in one of its most fundamental democratic responsibilities. The student movement of 2024, which began on university campuses and drew on the democratic culture of student political activism at its best, is a reminder of what the university can be when it serves its democratic function. The question is whether that reminder will prompt the structural reforms needed to protect and sustain that function.

The philosopher Jurgen Habermas, in his account of the "ideal speech situation" and communicative rationality, provides a framework for understanding what university culture at its best looks like. For Habermas, genuine communication is governed by norms of equality, sincerity, and rational justification: participants engage with each other on the basis of the force of argument rather than the power of their social position, and claims are accepted or rejected on the basis of evidence and reasoning rather than authority or coercion. The university, in this framework, is an institution designed to actualize the conditions of genuine communicative rationality: academic freedom protects the equality of participants, peer review ensures that claims are judged by evidence rather than by the identity of the claimant, and the norms of scholarly discourse commit participants to sincerity and to rational justification. When university governance is captured by patronage politics, when scholarly appointments are made on the basis of political loyalty rather than academic merit, and when student activists are intimidated or co-

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opted by partisan organizations, the communicative rationality of the university is destroyed, and with it the institution's capacity to serve either its academic or its democratic function.

1.4 Postcolonial Critiques and the Decolonization of the University

The contemporary discourse of higher education in Bangladesh cannot be complete without engaging seriously with the postcolonial critique of the university as an institution that bears the marks of colonial history and continues to reproduce colonial epistemic hierarchies in the post-independence era. This critique, which has gained significant international momentum under the rubric of "decolonizing the curriculum" and "epistemic justice," has direct relevance to the situation of Bangladeshi higher education, where the colonial legacy is still visible in the structure of academic disciplines, the dominance of Western theoretical frameworks, the language of scholarly communication, and the criteria by which academic excellence is measured.

The postcolonial critique of the university can be traced to the Fanonian tradition, in which the colonial university is understood as an institution that produces "mimic men," in Homi Bhabha's formulation: graduates who have been formed in the image of European intellectual culture and who are thereby alienated from their own cultural traditions and intellectual heritage. Frantz Fanon's insight, developed in "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961), is that decolonization is not complete until the colonial institutions have been genuinely transformed, not merely transferred from the control of foreign powers to local elites who continue to operate them according to the same colonial logic.

In the specific context of Bangladeshi higher education, the postcolonial critique directs attention to several structural features of the system that are rarely examined in mainstream policy debates. The dominance of Western social science and humanities frameworks in Bangladesh's university curricula, which means that students studying sociology, history, political science, and economics are primarily learning to apply theoretical frameworks developed in European and American intellectual traditions to the study of Bangladeshi society, rather than developing indigenous analytical frameworks grounded in the specific experience and intellectual heritage of South Asia and Bengal. The near-total dependence of Bangladesh's research community on international, primarily Western, sources of funding and publication venues, which means that the research agenda of Bangladesh's universities is shaped significantly by the priorities of international donors and journals rather than by the intellectual needs of Bangladeshi society. And the valorization of English-language scholarship as the legitimate form of academic knowledge, which means that serious intellectual work in Bengali is marginalized in the very institutions that should be the guardians of Bangladesh's intellectual heritage.

These are not simple problems to address, and the "decolonization" movement does not offer simple solutions. Some of its most vocal practitioners have substituted one form of intellectual dogmatism for another, replacing Western theoretical frameworks with their own preferred frameworks in ways that no more serve the genuine goal of free inquiry than the colonial frameworks they claim to replace. But the genuine insights of the postcolonial critique, the recognition that academic knowledge is never culturally neutral, that the dominance of particular traditions of inquiry in the university reflects historical power relations as much as epistemic

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merit, and that the development of genuinely excellent higher education in Bangladesh requires engagement with the country's own intellectual traditions as much as with imported frameworks, these insights are important and must be part of any serious account of what it would mean to reform higher education in Bangladesh.

Chapter Two: The Historical Architecture of Higher Education in Bangladesh

2.1 From Dhaka University to the Multi-Campus System: An Overview

When Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971, its higher education system was minimal by any standard. The University of Dhaka, established in 1921, was the only comprehensive university in the territory that became Bangladesh. Rajshahi University had been established in 1953, and the University of Chittagong in 1966. The Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), founded as the East Pakistan University of Engineering and Technology in 1962, provided technical education in engineering and architecture. Beyond these four institutions, higher education was provided through a network of degree colleges, most of them affiliated with the University of Dhaka, which offered two-year undergraduate programs in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences.

The Liberation War of 1971 inflicted severe damage on this already limited higher education infrastructure. The Pakistani military's deliberate targeting of intellectuals, the devastating killing of academics, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and teachers in the days immediately before Bangladesh's liberation, was the most direct assault. The massacre of the intellectuals on the fourteenth of December 1971, in which hundreds of the most distinguished figures of Bangladeshi intellectual life were killed, was a deliberate attempt to decapitate the intellectual leadership of the new nation. The universities that survived the war did so with decimated faculties, damaged infrastructure, and the profound trauma of having witnessed the murders of their colleagues.

The rebuilding of higher education in the post-independence period was slow, constrained by the enormous economic challenges facing the new state and by the political instability that followed the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. Jahangirnagar University had been established in 1970 and continued its operations after independence. Islamic University was established in Kushtia in 1980 under the Zia government. But the overall expansion of the higher education system was modest through the 1970s and 1980s: by 1990, Bangladesh had only a handful of public universities and a network of degree colleges serving a small fraction of the secondary school graduate population.

The transformation of the higher education landscape began in earnest with the return to parliamentary democracy in 1990 and the passage of the Private University Act in 1992. The 1992 act, which was itself a landmark in Bangladesh's higher education history, established the legal framework for the establishment of privately owned and operated degree-granting institutions for the first time. The immediate effect was dramatic. Within a decade, dozens of private universities had been established in Dhaka and other major cities, offering programs

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primarily in business administration, computer science, English, and law, areas where the demand from students was high and the capital requirements for establishing programs were relatively modest. By 2024, Bangladesh had over one hundred and eighty private universities in operation, ranging from genuinely excellent institutions like BRAC University and North South University to institutions of extremely limited quality that exist primarily as degree-dispensing commercial enterprises.

The public university sector also expanded significantly, if less dramatically, over the same period. By 2024, Bangladesh had fifty-five public universities, including specialized institutions in agriculture, science and technology, maritime affairs, and textile engineering, as well as the enormous Bangladesh Open University, which serves nearly two million students through distance learning, and the National University, which is less a single institution than an administrative framework for approximately two thousand affiliated colleges serving approximately three million students. The total enrollment in higher education institutions in Bangladesh reached approximately four million by the early 2020s, an extraordinary expansion from the forty thousand students enrolled in 1984.

2.2 The National University and the Affiliated College System: A Crisis of Scale

No analysis of higher education in Bangladesh can afford to neglect the National University and the system of affiliated colleges it coordinates, because this system serves the largest number of students of any higher education institution in the world, and its condition is one of the most serious educational crises in the country. Yet the National University is rarely the focus of reform discussions, which tend to concentrate on the more visible and more politically connected public research universities and the expanding private university sector.

The National University was established in 1992 under the National University Act with the primary purpose of coordinating and overseeing the network of colleges that provide undergraduate and postgraduate education across the country. These colleges, the majority of which are government colleges and nongovernment colleges receiving government grants, serve students who have completed their higher secondary education and wish to pursue bachelor's and master's degrees but who are unable to secure admission to public universities through the highly competitive admission examinations, and who cannot afford the fees of private universities.

The scale of the system is its defining characteristic and its most acute problem. Approximately three million students are enrolled in National University-affiliated colleges, distributed across approximately two thousand two hundred colleges spread throughout the country. Managing a system of this scale would be a formidable administrative challenge for even the best-resourced institution in the world. For the National University, which operates with severely limited administrative capacity, limited financial resources, and an IT infrastructure that has only partially digitized its processes, the management of the affiliated college system generates chronic dysfunction in virtually every dimension of its operation.

The quality of education in most National University-affiliated colleges is, by any reasonable assessment, very poor. The majority of colleges operate with significant shortages of qualified faculty: many positions are filled by temporary or part-time teachers who lack the academic

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qualifications for regular appointment and who receive little or no professional development support. Laboratory facilities in science departments are typically inadequate or non-functional. Library collections are limited and rarely updated. Classroom infrastructure is often overcrowded and poorly maintained. And the curriculum, which is set centrally by the National University and has historically changed slowly, is often significantly out of date with developments in the relevant academic fields.

The examination system of the National University reproduces and intensifies all the dysfunctions of the secondary examination system analyzed in Part Seven. The degree examinations set by the National University are heavily oriented toward rote memorization and the reproduction of standard answers to standard questions, providing neither an adequate assessment of students' actual learning nor useful feedback for improving teaching quality. The examination process is slow: results typically take many months to be announced after examinations are completed, creating extended periods of uncertainty for students and contributing to the "session jam" problem, the phenomenon by which students complete their degree programs many months or years later than the nominal duration of the program would suggest.

The session jam problem deserves extended discussion because it is one of the most significant and most damaging features of higher education in Bangladesh, affecting both public universities and the National University's affiliated college system. A session jam occurs when the actual progress of students through their degree program falls significantly behind the nominal schedule, typically because of disruption to academic calendars caused by political events, examination delays, student strikes, or administrative dysfunction. Session jams of two to four years, meaning that students who enrolled in a four-year degree program take six to eight years to complete it, have been common in Bangladeshi public universities throughout the post-independence period. The costs of session jams are multiple and severe: they extend the period during which students are dependent on their families rather than entering the labor market, they demoralize students and reduce the quality of their engagement with their studies, they make it difficult for employers to predict the timing of the supply of graduates, and they represent an enormous waste of productive capacity.

The July-August 2024 student uprising, and the political disruption that accompanied it, created another session jam across public universities and National University colleges, adding to the existing backlog of delayed academic schedules. The normalization of academic life in the post-uprising period has been slow: as New Age Bangladesh reported in reviewing 2024, "the normal academic atmosphere and order have not yet returned in the educational institutions after the July-August student-people uprising." The management of the session jam legacy, while ensuring that the disruption is not simply passed on to future cohorts through further delays, is one of the most immediate and practical challenges facing the higher education administration in the post-2024 period.

2.3 The Expansion of Private Universities: Promise and Performance

The private university sector that emerged from the 1992 Private University Act and its subsequent amendments represents one of the most dramatic and most ambiguous developments

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in Bangladesh's educational history. In little more than three decades, the sector grew from nothing to over one hundred and eighty institutions serving hundreds of thousands of students. This expansion was driven by a combination of genuine social demand for higher education, the liberalizing economic policy environment of the 1990s, and the commercial opportunities that private university education represented for investors in a context where public university capacity was grossly inadequate to meet the demand.

The private university sector encompasses an extraordinarily wide range in terms of quality, purpose, and institutional character. At one end of the spectrum are a small number of genuinely serious academic institutions: North South University, the first private university established under the 1992 act, has developed genuine research capacity in several departments, maintains rigorous academic standards, and has established a reputation that is respected domestically and to some extent internationally. BRAC University, established in 2001 as the institutional expression of BRAC's educational mission, has developed particular strengths in development studies, public health, and education, drawing on BRAC's extraordinary experience as the world's largest non-governmental development organization. Independent University Bangladesh and East West University have developed respectable programs in business, law, and the liberal arts. These institutions are not world-class by international standards of research output and academic ranking, but they are genuine educational institutions with meaningful academic cultures, qualified faculty, and students who receive an education of genuine value.

At the other end of the spectrum are institutions that exist primarily as commercial enterprises, offering degrees with minimal academic substance to students who are paying for a credential rather than an education. These institutions, some of which exist without adequate physical campus facilities, with faculties composed almost entirely of part-time teachers with limited research experience, and with curricula that amount to a superficial survey of the relevant professional fields, represent a massive fraud on the students who enroll in them and on the society that must eventually absorb their graduates. The University Grants Commission has intermittently taken action against the worst offenders, ordering some institutions to cease operations or to suspend admissions, but the scale of the problem and the political connections of many private university owners have made systematic quality enforcement extremely difficult.

The governance structure of private universities is an important dimension of their quality problem. The Private University Act established a board of trustees as the governing body of private universities, with the trustees being the founding investors of the institution. This governance structure gives ultimate authority over the institution to its financial investors rather than to its academic community, creating an incentive structure that prioritizes financial returns over academic quality. Private university trustees in Bangladesh have frequently intervened in academic decisions in ways that are incompatible with genuine academic freedom: dismissing faculty members who are perceived as commercially inconvenient, adjusting examination results to reduce failure rates that might discourage enrollment, and resisting the development of research programs that are academically important but financially unremunerative. The experience of private university governance in Bangladesh provides a powerful illustration of why the commercialization of higher education, without adequate quality assurance frameworks and governance safeguards, is a recipe for academic degradation rather than educational improvement.

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2.4 The University Grants Commission: Regulatory Architecture and Its Failures

The University Grants Commission (UGC), established under the University Grants Commission Order 1973, is the principal regulatory body for higher education in Bangladesh. Its statutory functions include advising the government on the financial needs of universities, allocating government grants to public universities, and overseeing the establishment and operation of both public and private universities. It is, in theory, the institution responsible for ensuring the quality, relevance, and integrity of Bangladesh's higher education system. In practice, it has consistently fallen short of this responsibility, for reasons that are structural, financial, and political.

The structural limitations of the UGC are significant. It was designed in an era when Bangladesh had only a handful of public universities and no private universities: its organizational capacity and its regulatory framework have never been adequately updated to reflect the reality of a system with fifty-five public universities, over one hundred and eighty private universities, the Bangladesh Open University, and the National University's network of two thousand colleges. As the Financial Express analysis of higher education reform has noted, "the capacities of UGC have not grown in line with its responsibilities. In particular, the accreditation functions suffered. In 2017 a new Accreditation Council was established, but it is not yet fully functional. The UGC capability in the area of development of the university research is a huge constraint."

The financial limitations compound the structural ones. The UGC's budget is inadequate for the scale of the regulatory and development tasks it faces. Its ability to fund quality improvement initiatives in public universities, to finance research grants, to develop and implement quality assurance frameworks, and to conduct the kind of systematic monitoring and evaluation that effective regulation requires is severely constrained by the limited resources at its disposal. Bangladesh's education expenditure, at approximately 1.69 percent of GDP in fiscal year 2024, down from 2.08 percent in 2022, is among the lowest in the world, and higher education receives a disproportionately small share even of this limited allocation.

The political limitations are perhaps the most fundamental. The UGC's formal mandate includes significant regulatory authority over private universities, including the power to approve or reject their establishment, to monitor their compliance with quality standards, and to take action against institutions that fail to meet these standards. But the exercise of this authority is profoundly constrained by the political connections of many private university owners, who are often prominent businesspeople, politicians, or political financiers with direct access to the government ministers who have ultimate authority over the UGC. The pattern that emerges from decades of observation is that the UGC has been able to exercise its regulatory authority against politically unconnected private institutions while being effectively unable to take meaningful action against institutions owned by politically connected individuals.

The governance of the UGC itself has been subject to the same pattern of political capture that affects university governance more broadly. The UGC chairman is appointed by the government, and successive governments have appointed chairmen who are loyal to the ruling party rather than independent academic leaders committed to the integrity of the higher education system. This has meant that the UGC's regulatory decisions, particularly on politically sensitive matters like the establishment of new public universities in politically significant locations and the

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enforcement of quality standards against politically connected private universities, have been shaped by political calculations rather than by the academic criteria that the UGC's mandate requires it to apply.

Chapter Three: The Crisis of University Governance -- Politicization, Patronage, and the Subversion of Academic Life

3.1 The Architecture of Politicization

The politicization of Bangladesh's public universities is the single most important structural problem in the higher education system, and it is the problem that most directly undermines the university's capacity to serve any of the functions -- academic, economic, or democratic -- that the philosophy of higher education assigns to it. Understanding how this politicization works requires examining several interlocking mechanisms that together constitute what one might call the architecture of politicization: the appointment of vice-chancellors by political patronage, the organization of teachers and students into partisan factions, the use of university resources for partisan purposes, and the suppression of academic dissent through political intimidation.

The vice-chancellor appointment process is the keystone of the architecture. In Bangladesh's public universities, the vice-chancellor is the chief executive of the institution, responsible for academic leadership, administrative management, financial stewardship, and the overall quality and direction of the university's work. The vice-chancellor's power within the institution is substantial: she or he has significant influence over faculty appointments, over the allocation of research resources, over the management of student affairs, and over the institutional culture of the university. Whoever appoints the vice-chancellor therefore controls, in significant measure, the direction and character of the institution.

In theory, the appointment of vice-chancellors in Bangladesh's public universities is governed by the specific statutes of each institution. For Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong, and Jahangirnagar universities, the statutes provide that the vice-chancellor should be appointed from a panel of three candidates elected by the Senate of the university, the highest academic body of the institution. In practice, as the New Age Bangladesh editorial on partisan governance of public universities has documented with painful clarity, "this process is not properly followed." The Senate election process has been repeatedly delayed, bypassed, or manipulated to ensure that the government's preferred candidate is included in or emerges from the panel.

The pattern is consistent across successive governments of different political complexions. Under the Awami League governments of Sheikh Hasina, vice-chancellors were appointed from among academics with close ties to the Awami League, typically those who were members or leaders of the Bangabandhu Parishad or other pro-Awami League academic organizations. When the Hasina government fell in August 2024 and the interim government of Muhammad Yunus took power, the vice-chancellors appointed by the previous government were dismissed or resigned under pressure from students who associated them with the fallen regime. The interim government then appointed new vice-chancellors -- but as The Daily Star reported in December

2024, "the interim administration quickly gave in to the same political logic, appointing 30 VCs and 18 pro-VCs and treasurers with links to pro-BNP and pro-Jamaat teachers' bodies." And when the BNP government came to power following elections, the same pattern continued: "the new VC of Dhaka University is also the education affairs secretary of BNP central committee. The new UGC chairman sits on the party chairperson's advisory council."

This persistence of the patronage appointment pattern across governments of radically different political character is the most important and most discouraging feature of the higher education governance situation. It suggests that the politicization of university leadership is not simply a consequence of the specific political character of any individual government: it is a systemic feature of the relationship between higher education and the state in Bangladesh, one that reflects a structural logic of institutional capture that transcends the partisan preferences of any particular administration. Changing this requires not just a change of government but a change in the institutional framework within which government and university interact.

3.2 The Teacher Party System and Its Academic Consequences

Closely related to the vice-chancellor appointment politics is the organization of university teachers into partisan factions aligned with the major political parties. In Bangladesh's public universities, teachers are organized into competing teacher associations that are effectively the academic wing of the major political parties: the Bangabandhu Parishad and the Blue Panel, associated with the Awami League; the Jatiyatabadi Shikkhak Forum (Nationalist Teachers' Forum), the White Panel, and the Zia Parishad, associated with the BNP; and various smaller formations associated with Jamaat-e-Islami and other parties.

These teacher organizations play a central role in the appointment and promotion politics of public universities. Faculty recruitment committees are composed, in practice, largely of members of the dominant teacher party, and appointment decisions reflect political loyalty as much as academic merit. Transparency International Bangladesh documented this with specificity in its 2016 report, which found that "political patronage, favouritism, regionalism and religious identity" were "major drivers of corruption in recruitment across 13 institutions." A faculty member who is affiliated with the wrong political organization may find her academic career significantly impaired regardless of the quality of her research and teaching, while a faculty member with the right political connections may receive appointments and promotions that her academic record would not otherwise justify.

The consequences for academic culture are devastating. When appointment and promotion depend significantly on political loyalty rather than academic merit, the incentives for serious scholarly work are severely weakened. A faculty member who knows that her career advancement depends more on her relationship with the dominant teacher party than on her research output and teaching quality will rationally invest more effort in political networking than in scholarship. This is not a judgment about the personal character of individual faculty members: it is an observation about the predictable consequences of perverse institutional incentives. The result is a faculty culture in many public universities in which political calculation pervades academic decisions, in which genuine scholarly autonomy is compromised,

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and in which the institutional conditions for serious research and excellent teaching are systematically undermined.

The teacher party system also affects the quality of administrative decision-making within universities. Decisions about curriculum development, about research priorities, about student affairs, and about resource allocation are made in a political environment in which the dominant consideration is often how the decision affects the balance of power between competing teacher factions rather than how it serves the educational interests of students or the academic mission of the institution. This creates a form of institutional paralysis in which even urgent academic reforms are delayed or blocked because they threaten the interests of one or another political faction.

3.3 Student Politics: Historical Significance and Contemporary Degeneration

Student politics in Bangladesh has a history of genuine democratic achievement. The language martyrs of 1952 were students. The mass movement that overthrew the Ayub Khan dictatorship in 1969 was significantly led by students organized in the student organizations of the major political parties. Students played a central role in the Liberation War of 1971. And students were in the vanguard of the pro-democracy movement that ended military rule in 1990, a movement in which the student organizations of both the Awami League and the BNP cooperated in demanding the restoration of democratic government. More recently, the student movement of 2018 that protested unsafe roads and demanded traffic reform, and the transformative student uprising of 2024 that overthrew the Hasina government, demonstrated again that Bangladeshi students retain the capacity for principled political action in the democratic interest.

This history of democratic achievement makes the contemporary degeneration of student politics all the more tragic. The student organizations of the major political parties, primarily the Bangladesh Chhatra League (student wing of the Awami League) and the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (student wing of the BNP), have functioned in recent decades less as organizations devoted to students' educational and democratic interests and more as instruments of their parent parties' political agendas on university campuses. They have been used by whichever party is in power to control access to student dormitories, to intimidate political opponents, to collect extortion payments from contractors and vendors operating on campuses, and to suppress dissent through the threat or use of physical violence.

The murder of BUET student Abrar Fahad in October 2019, beaten to death in his dormitory room by members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League for allegedly posting pro-India content on social media, brought the violence of politicized student culture to international attention and generated enormous public outcry. BUET's decision to ban all student political organizations from campus in the aftermath of Fahad's murder was both understandable and instructive. BUET's reputation as Bangladesh's premier technical institution has been maintained in part by its relative insulation from the worst forms of student politics, and its decision to formalize that insulation was widely supported. But as Times Higher Education noted, "without addressing these root causes of the degeneration of Bangladeshi student politics, the ban on student-led political organisations imposed by BUET's vice-chancellor four days after Fahad's murder will not work. Political leadership from the very highest level is an imperative."

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The aftermath of the July 2024 uprising has created a new and complicated situation for student politics. The Chhatra League, which had been the dominant student organization on most campuses during the Hasina years, was discredited by its role in violently suppressing the student uprising. In the DUCSU elections of September 2025, as documented on the Wikipedia page for those elections, the Bangladesh Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, achieved a landmark victory, winning the vice-president, general secretary, and assistant general secretary positions alongside the majority of secretarial and member positions. This was an extraordinary political development: Shibir winning the leadership of what is often called the "second parliament" of Bangladesh, an institution historically dominated by AL and BNP-affiliated students. As the Australian Institute of International Affairs analysis noted, it reflected not so much a shift toward Islamist ideology among the student body as a rejection of both the AL and BNP student organizations and a decision to give an opportunity to an organization that had contributed significantly to the 2024 uprising and had not been previously associated with the abuses of campus politics that Chhatra League and Chhatra Dal had committed.

The implications for higher education governance of this new student politics are significant and uncertain. If Shibir demonstrates the kind of responsible campus leadership that the student voters who supported it evidently hope for, it could contribute to a healthier student political culture. If it reproduces the patronage and intimidation patterns of its predecessors, the opportunity for reform will be squandered. The early signs are mixed: the protest of "general students" against the declaration of hall committees by the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, demanding a prohibition on hall-based politics, suggests that a substantial portion of the student body remains deeply skeptical of all partisan student organizations and continues to aspire to a more genuinely academic and democratic campus culture.

3.4 Academic Freedom: The Legal Framework and Its Violation

Academic freedom is the foundational condition for genuine scholarly inquiry, and its protection is therefore the foundational requirement for a genuinely functioning university. Without academic freedom, the university cannot serve any of the functions that justify its existence: it cannot pursue truth through research, because research must go where the evidence leads and this requires the freedom to challenge received opinion; it cannot cultivate critical thinking in its students, because critical thinking requires the freedom to question authority; and it cannot serve as a democratic institution, because democracy requires the free expression and exchange of ideas.

The legal framework for academic freedom in Bangladesh is weak and has been consistently weakened further by governments that found university scholarship inconvenient. The Bangladesh Constitution provides for freedom of expression as a fundamental right, subject to restrictions that have been interpreted broadly by courts that have often been deferential to executive power. The specific statutes governing public universities provide for academic freedom in general terms but do not establish robust procedural protections for individual academics who face discipline or dismissal for their scholarly work or public statements.

The pattern of academic freedom violations in Bangladesh's public universities is extensive and consistent. Academics have faced disciplinary proceedings for writing newspaper articles critical

of government policy, for expressing views on social media that were perceived as politically inconvenient, for conducting research that challenged officially sanctioned narratives, and for signing public statements in support of causes that the government opposed. The Digital Security Act 2018, subsequently amended as the Cyber Security Act 2023, with its broad and vaguely defined provisions against "spreading propaganda" and "harming digital security," has been used to prosecute or threaten academics who have expressed views online that the government finds objectionable. International academic freedom organizations including Scholars at Risk have consistently placed Bangladesh among the countries of serious concern in their monitoring of academic freedom violations.

The interim government of Muhammad Yunus made some gestures toward improving the academic freedom situation, releasing academics who had been detained under the Digital Security Act and signaling a commitment to freedom of expression. But the structural conditions that generate academic freedom violations, including the politicization of university governance, the vulnerability of academics to dismissal for political rather than academic reasons, and the absence of robust procedural protections for academic expression, have not been addressed. The appointment of politically connected vice-chancellors who have personal incentives to suppress dissent that might embarrass their political patrons continues to create conditions for academic freedom violations regardless of the formal commitments of any particular government to freedom of expression.

Chapter Four: Research and Innovation -- The Intellectual Poverty of the Bangladeshi Academy

4.1 Research as Vocation and Institution

The research function of the university is the dimension of higher education in Bangladesh that is most visibly and most completely underdeveloped. To say that Bangladesh's universities are not research universities is not a criticism of their individual faculty members, many of whom have the intellectual ability and the scholarly aspiration to conduct excellent research. It is an observation about institutional structure: the institutions within which Bangladesh's university faculty work have not been designed, funded, or managed to support serious research, and the result is a level of research output that is, by any comparative standard, extraordinarily low relative to the size and ambition of the university system.

The data on Bangladesh's research output is stark. Bangladesh consistently ranks near the bottom of comparisons of research productivity among middle-income countries in Asia. The number of publications in internationally indexed journals produced by Bangladesh's entire university system each year is comparable to that produced by a single medium-sized research university in India, Malaysia, or South Korea. The H-index scores of Bangladesh's most productive researchers, a measure of the impact and citation frequency of their published work, are significantly lower than those of researchers at comparable institutions in neighboring countries. Bangladesh's performance on global innovation indices, which reflect the country's capacity to generate and apply new knowledge, is consistently poor, ranking far below its peer group on

indicators of patent applications, scientific publications, and research and development expenditure.

The causes of this research poverty are multiple and have been extensively documented. First and most fundamentally, the public funding for research is inadequate to the point of being almost non-existent in most disciplines. The research budget allocated to Bangladesh's public universities is tiny relative to the actual cost of conducting serious research, and the mechanisms for distributing even this limited research funding are poorly designed, inadequately transparent, and heavily influenced by political patronage. A university teacher in Bangladesh who wishes to conduct research must typically do so in the absence of any institutional research funding, relying on their own resources, on international grants from foreign funding agencies, or on the indirect support of NGO and development organization collaborations that set the research agenda according to their own priorities rather than those of the academic.

Second, the teaching load of most university faculty in Bangladesh's public universities is far too heavy to allow serious engagement with research. Full professors in public universities typically teach many more contact hours per week than their counterparts at research universities in other countries, leaving inadequate time for the reading, writing, data collection, and analytical reflection that research requires. The culture of the university, shaped partly by necessity and partly by the political incentives discussed in the previous chapter, does not treat research as a primary professional obligation of university faculty but as an optional extra -- something that academically ambitious faculty pursue in their own time while fulfilling their institutional obligations through teaching and committee work.

Third, the infrastructure needed for modern research, including well-equipped laboratories, comprehensive library collections, reliable and fast internet connectivity, access to international academic databases, and computing resources adequate for large-scale data analysis, is inadequate or absent in most of Bangladesh's public universities. A researcher who wishes to access the major international journals in her field must either pay prohibitive subscription fees from her own resources or rely on whatever limited access the university library has been able to negotiate, which is typically inadequate for serious scholarly work. The Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN), established as part of the World Bank-supported Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP), represents an important initiative to improve connectivity and access to digital research resources, but its coverage and bandwidth remain insufficient for the needs of a serious research community.

Fourth, the incentive structure within public universities provides weak rewards for research productivity. Faculty salaries are determined primarily by seniority and are largely unaffected by research output. Promotion decisions give significant weight to teaching hours and administrative service, and the informal weight given to political affiliation in the academic career is if anything stronger than the weight given to research publications. In this incentive environment, the rational response for a faculty member who wishes to advance her career is to invest effort in activities that are directly rewarded -- teaching, administrative committee work, and political networking -- rather than in research, which is time-consuming, difficult, and provides limited career benefits within the institution.

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4.2 The Brain Drain and the International Research Community

A significant consequence of the inadequate research environment in Bangladesh's universities is the brain drain: the emigration of Bangladesh's most talented graduates to universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and increasingly to universities in Southeast Asia and the Gulf states, where they can access the resources, mentorship, and institutional support needed for serious research careers. Bangladesh's most intellectually able graduates, those who receive the highest marks on the public university admission examinations, typically aspire not to academic careers in Bangladesh's public universities but to graduate education abroad and to research careers in the international academy.

The brain drain is not simply a loss of individual talent: it represents a systematic transfer of Bangladesh's most valuable intellectual resources to the benefit of other countries' universities and research systems. The students who leave Bangladesh for graduate education abroad are, in many cases, subsidized by Bangladesh's own educational system in their early formation: their secondary and undergraduate education was funded by the state or by their families' investment in Bangladeshi education. When these individuals build their research careers in foreign universities rather than returning to contribute to the development of Bangladesh's own research capacity, the investment of their early education yields its intellectual returns to other societies.

The question of whether and how to reverse the brain drain is one of the most difficult questions in higher education policy, and it does not admit of simple solutions. Individuals who have built research careers in institutions with world-class resources and research cultures cannot simply be commanded to return to institutions that lack those resources and that culture. The development of the institutional conditions in Bangladesh's universities that would make them genuinely attractive to internationally trained researchers -- adequate research funding, academic freedom, professional autonomy, competitive salaries, and a research culture that values and rewards scholarship -- is a project of years or decades rather than months.

Some partial solutions are available and have been partially implemented. Diaspora engagement programs, which seek to involve Bangladeshi academics in the international academy in mentoring, curriculum development, collaborative research, and occasional teaching in Bangladesh's universities, represent a way of drawing on the intellectual resources of the diaspora without requiring full return. The development of joint degree programs and research collaborations between Bangladesh's universities and leading international universities can help to bring international research standards and practices into the Bangladeshi academic environment without depending on the full return of Bangladeshi researchers from abroad. And the development of more competitive research grant mechanisms, potentially drawing on both government and private funding, could create the financial incentives needed to attract at least some internationally trained researchers back to Bangladesh.

4.3 Research Policy and the Strategic Plan for Higher Education

The Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh 2018 to 2030, developed by the UGC under the Ministry of Education, acknowledged the research crisis explicitly and set out an ambitious agenda for research development that included the establishment of a National

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Research Council, significant increases in research funding, the development of university-industry research linkages, and the improvement of intellectual property rights frameworks to protect the outputs of university research. These were the right commitments in principle, and the process of developing the strategic plan through extensive consultation was itself a valuable exercise in collective reflection on the higher education system's needs and directions.

The problem is implementation. The Strategic Plan acknowledged that implementing its research recommendations would require substantial increases in public funding for higher education research, increases that have not materialized in the years since the plan was published. Education's share of GDP continued to fall through the plan period rather than rising toward the levels that would be needed to implement its ambitions. The National Research Council that the plan recommended has not been established. The university-industry linkage mechanisms that the plan envisaged have not been developed. And the intellectual property rights framework that is a prerequisite for university-industry research collaboration remains inadequate.

The failure to implement the Strategic Plan's research recommendations is not simply a matter of resource constraints, although resources are genuinely limited. It also reflects a political economy in which the constituencies that benefit from research investment, specifically the university research community and the knowledge-intensive industries that could benefit from university-generated knowledge, are relatively weak compared to the constituencies that benefit from other uses of public funds. Research investment is a long-term bet that may not yield political returns within the time horizon of any individual government, while investments in visible infrastructure, in subsidies for politically connected industries, or in expanding enrollment in existing programs provide more immediate political rewards. Changing this political economy requires building a stronger national consensus about the importance of research for Bangladesh's long-term development, and this is fundamentally a task of public persuasion and political leadership.

Chapter Five: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and the Labor Market -- The Relevance Crisis

5.1 The Mismatch Between Higher Education and the Economy

One of the most frequently cited problems of Bangladesh's higher education system is the mismatch between what the universities produce and what the economy needs. The complaint is familiar across many developing countries, but its specific character in Bangladesh reflects the particular structure of the country's economy and the specific ways in which its higher education system has developed.

The economy of Bangladesh in 2024 and 2025 is undergoing a complex structural transformation. The garment industry, which has been the engine of export growth and industrialization since the 1980s, is itself transforming: as The Financial Express noted, "the RMG sector is transforming rapidly from low-skill labour intensive production to capital, technology and high-skill intensive production process." The skills base needed for this transformation, including engineering, technical design, logistics management, and the

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application of digital technology to production processes, is not yet being adequately produced by the higher education system. Meanwhile, the emerging service sectors that are growing rapidly, including information technology, financial technology, digital commerce, healthcare, and professional services, have their own skill demands that the university system is poorly positioned to meet, partly because the curricula of most programs are not regularly updated to reflect changing industry needs, and partly because the teaching methods of most university programs do not develop the applied skills and problem-solving capacities that employers in these sectors value.

The data on graduate unemployment and underemployment in Bangladesh is consistent with the mismatch diagnosis. A significant proportion of university graduates in Bangladesh are unable to find employment commensurate with their qualifications, and many of those who do find employment are working in jobs that do not require or make use of the specific knowledge they acquired in their degree programs. The particular vulnerability of graduates from lower-quality private universities and from many National University-affiliated colleges, whose degrees signal a level of education that their actual competencies may not support, is a serious problem both for the individuals involved and for the credibility of the higher education system as a whole.

The mismatch problem has several distinct dimensions that must be disentangled in any serious policy analysis. There is a skills mismatch, in which the specific competencies that graduates possess differ from those that employers in the most dynamic sectors of the economy value. There is a disciplinary mismatch, in which too large a proportion of graduates have degrees in disciplines like humanities and social sciences where employment opportunities are limited, and too small a proportion in fields like engineering, computer science, healthcare, and business where demand for graduates is strong. There is a geographic mismatch, in which many graduates are educated in urban universities but the employment opportunities that most need the contribution of educated workers are in rural areas or in towns that do not have major university centers. And there is a quality mismatch, in which the overall level of competence of many graduates, regardless of their discipline, is insufficient for the roles they aspire to fill.

Each of these mismatches requires a different policy response, and addressing them simultaneously without sacrificing the liberal educational values that the university should also serve is a genuinely difficult intellectual and policy challenge. The narrow vocational response, which would reorganize higher education entirely around the goal of producing graduates with specific employer-demanded skills, risks producing a system that serves the short-term needs of the labor market at the expense of the longer-term intellectual and democratic functions of higher education. But a system that ignores labor market relevance entirely, that produces graduates with general academic credentials but limited practical competencies, is failing both its students and the society that funds it.

5.2 Curriculum Reform and Its Obstacles

The reform of university curricula to improve labor market relevance is a priority that has been consistently acknowledged in Bangladesh's higher education policy documents but consistently inadequately implemented. The obstacles to curriculum reform in Bangladesh's public universities are multiple and deeply rooted.

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The first obstacle is governance. In Bangladesh's public universities, curriculum decisions require approval through a complex hierarchy of academic committees, from the departmental committee through the faculty committee to the academic council of the university. This process is designed to protect academic standards by requiring collective deliberation, but in practice it often creates significant delays and rigidities that make it difficult to update curricula in response to rapidly changing labor market demands. A curriculum revision that might take weeks in a well-governed university can take years in a university where committee processes are chronically disrupted by political tensions, session jams, and administrative dysfunction.

The second obstacle is faculty expertise and incentives. Curriculum reform requires faculty who have both the academic expertise to understand what the curriculum should contain and the practical insight to understand how it connects to professional practice. In departments where faculty are significantly out of touch with current developments in their field, where they have been teaching from the same notes for many years without updating their own knowledge through research or professional engagement, curriculum reform is inhibited by the gap between what the curriculum should become and what the faculty can actually teach. And where faculty incentives do not reward the effort of curriculum development, as is typically the case in Bangladesh's public universities, the motivation to invest in this time-consuming work is limited.

The third obstacle is the examination system. The curriculum of a university course is not simply its syllabus: it is the entire set of learning experiences, activities, assessments, and expectations that shape what students actually learn. When the examination system rewards the rote memorization of facts and the reproduction of standard answers, the effective curriculum of the course, what students actually study and how they actually learn, will be dominated by examination preparation regardless of what the official syllabus says. Curriculum reform that changes the syllabus without changing the examination and assessment system is, as experience in Bangladesh has consistently demonstrated, reform that does not penetrate to the actual learning experience of students.

5.3 The Liberal Arts Question

One of the most important and least-discussed dimensions of curriculum reform in Bangladesh's higher education is the question of liberal arts education. The dominant model of undergraduate education in Bangladesh, both in public universities and in private universities, is narrowly disciplinary: students enter a specific academic department on the first day of their undergraduate program and study a defined curriculum within that discipline for the entire three or four years of their degree. There is no general education requirement, no systematic exposure to a breadth of disciplines, and no institutional expectation that graduates of, say, a chemistry program will have developed any competency in historical reasoning, ethical analysis, or quantitative social science.

This narrowly disciplinary model reflects a conception of higher education as specialized professional training rather than as the formation of broadly educated persons. It produces graduates who may have developed considerable depth of knowledge in their specific field but who lack the breadth of intellectual formation that would allow them to navigate complex problems that do not respect disciplinary boundaries, to engage thoughtfully with ethical and

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civic questions, or to adapt to the kinds of career transitions that the rapidly changing economy will increasingly require.

The alternative, a liberal arts model in which undergraduate students are required to engage with a range of disciplines before or alongside their major specialization, has been explicitly incorporated into the curricula of a small number of Bangladesh's better private universities. BRAC University's general education requirements and North South University's core curriculum both reflect, to varying degrees, the conviction that undergraduates should be exposed to a breadth of intellectual experience beyond their major discipline. But these experiments in liberal arts education have been implemented in a context where neither the faculty culture, the assessment system, nor the wider social expectation of higher education strongly supports this approach, making their effectiveness limited.

The philosophical case for liberal arts education in Bangladesh is compelling. In a society characterized by rapid change, deep inequality, and complex challenges of governance, economic development, and social cohesion, the formation of graduates who can think across disciplinary boundaries, engage ethically with complex problems, communicate effectively in multiple registers, and exercise informed democratic judgment is not a luxury: it is an urgent social necessity. The narrow disciplinary model that produces technically trained specialists but civic and ethical illiterates is not adequate for the challenges that Bangladesh faces. Building a broader culture of liberal arts education, in which the development of general intellectual capacities is treated as an equally important goal of higher education as the transmission of specific disciplinary knowledge, is one of the most important long-term challenges of higher education reform.

Chapter Six: The Economics of Higher Education -- Financing, Access, and Equity

6.1 The Public Finance of Higher Education

The financial situation of Bangladesh's higher education system reflects the same contradiction that characterizes the overall educational system: the political rhetoric of education as a national priority coexists with levels of public investment that are inconsistent with this priority. Bangladesh's total expenditure on education as a share of GDP, at approximately 1.69 percent in 2024, is among the lowest in the world, and within this limited overall allocation, higher education receives an additional share that is inadequate for the institutional functions it is supposed to perform.

Public universities in Bangladesh are funded through government grants allocated by the UGC on the basis of a formula that reflects historical patterns of funding rather than any systematic assessment of the actual cost of providing quality higher education. The adequacy of this funding for the operational needs of the institutions is seriously in question: most public universities face chronic underfunding of their basic operational requirements, including faculty salaries that are too low to attract the most talented academics away from more lucrative private sector opportunities, laboratory and library budgets that are insufficient to maintain and update research

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and teaching infrastructure, and physical infrastructure that is deteriorating for lack of maintenance funding.

The inadequacy of public funding for higher education has had several important consequences. First, it has driven many public universities to seek alternative revenue through student fees, through commercial activities on campus, and through various forms of partnership with the private sector that have not always been well-governed or academically appropriate. The fees charged by public universities, while low by international standards, represent a significant financial burden for many students from lower-income families, and the differential between the costs of public and private university education is a major determinant of access patterns. Second, it has created a dependence on international donor funding for research and quality improvement initiatives that has allowed international organizations, particularly the World Bank, to have substantial influence over the direction of higher education reform in Bangladesh in ways that may not always reflect the country's own intellectual and developmental priorities.

Third, the inadequacy of public university salaries, relative to what the private sector offers, has made it increasingly difficult for public universities to attract and retain the most talented academics. A brilliant young economist, lawyer, or computer scientist in Bangladesh faces a choice between a public university faculty position with limited remuneration, heavy teaching loads, inadequate research support, and a highly politicized work environment on one hand, and a position in the private sector, in an international NGO, in a high-fee private university, or in the international academy on the other. The incentives clearly favor the non-public-university options for all but those who have a specific commitment to the public university mission or who cannot access the alternatives for whatever reason. The public universities are losing the competition for talent, and the long-term consequences for their academic quality are severe.

6.2 The Private University Fee Structure and Access

The private university sector in Bangladesh operates on a full-fee basis: students or their families pay the full cost of their education, with some partial scholarship support available at the better private institutions. This fee structure makes private university education inaccessible to all but the most affluent Bangladeshi families in the case of the higher-fee institutions, and a significant financial strain even for middle-class families in the case of the lower-fee private universities.

The consequence is a bifurcated higher education market in which students are sorted primarily by economic background rather than by academic ability. Academically strong students from wealthy families can access high-quality private universities or can study abroad. Academically strong students from less wealthy backgrounds must compete for the limited places available in public universities through the highly competitive admission examinations. Students from middle-income families who cannot secure public university places often enroll in private universities, taking on significant financial burdens that may or may not be rewarded by the employment outcomes they achieve. And students from poor families, particularly those from rural areas, are in practice largely excluded from higher education regardless of their academic ability, because neither the public university capacity nor the private university fee structure makes genuine higher education accessible to them.

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The inequity of this pattern has been frequently documented and consistently noted in policy discussions. The strategic plan for higher education explicitly identified inclusiveness as one of five key challenge areas, and multiple policy documents have called for the development of scholarship programs, student loan schemes, and other mechanisms to expand access to higher education for students from lower-income backgrounds. But the implementation of these mechanisms has been slow and inadequate. A national student loan program, which would allow students from low-income families to finance their higher education through loans repaid from subsequent earnings, has been discussed for years but has not been established. The scholarship programs that do exist are limited in scale and are often allocated on the basis of political connections rather than financial need and academic merit.

6.3 The Political Economy of Private University Expansion

The expansion of private universities in Bangladesh since 1992 has been driven not primarily by educational planning but by the political economy of educational investment. Private universities represent an attractive investment opportunity in a context of high social demand for higher education credentials, limited public university capacity, and regulatory frameworks that have been permissive enough to allow the establishment of institutions with limited academic infrastructure. The investors who established private universities in Bangladesh include prominent businesspeople, politicians, and in some cases members of their families, creating a pattern of overlap between educational investment and political power that has significant implications for the governance and regulation of the sector.

The concentration of private university ownership among economically and politically powerful individuals creates a structural obstacle to the kind of quality regulation that the sector needs. When private university owners have the political connections to block or circumvent regulatory action against their institutions, the UGC's regulatory authority is effectively neutralized for the most egregious cases. The pattern of regulatory capture, in which the regulatory body comes to serve the interests of the regulated industry rather than the public interest it is supposed to protect, has been documented in Bangladesh's private university sector and represents a fundamental failure of educational governance.

The reform of the private university regulatory framework, including the strengthening of UGC independence, the development of genuine quality assurance mechanisms with real enforcement powers, and the management of the conflicts of interest created by the overlap between private university ownership and political power, is an urgent governance priority. The model of private university governance that has produced consistently excellent results in other contexts, a model in which private universities are governed by independent boards of trustees accountable for academic quality rather than financial returns, in which institutional interests are clearly distinguished from the personal financial interests of founders and investors, and in which quality assurance is conducted by genuinely independent accreditation bodies rather than by regulatory agencies subject to political influence, offers a direction for reform that would significantly improve the quality and integrity of the private university sector.

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Chapter Seven: Specialized Higher Education -- Technical, Agricultural, and Professional Universities

7.1 The Technical University Sector: BUET and Its Cousins

Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) occupies a unique and somewhat paradoxical position in Bangladesh's higher education landscape. It is widely regarded, both domestically and internationally, as the country's premier academic institution, producing graduates who go on to distinguished careers in engineering, technology, and related fields in Bangladesh and abroad. Its admission process is highly competitive, its faculty includes some of Bangladesh's most productive researchers, and its campus culture has maintained a relatively high degree of academic seriousness compared to the general public university sector. The abolition of party-based student politics after the Abrar Fahad murder in 2019, and the maintenance of this policy despite subsequent political pressures, has contributed to a campus environment that is significantly less disrupted by political conflict than most other public universities.

BUET's paradox is that it exists as an island of relative institutional integrity within a higher education landscape that is deeply compromised, and the island quality is maintained at least partly by the specific social and cultural dynamics of engineering education, including the self-selection of a student body that is unusually focused on academic rather than political activity, rather than by any robust institutional mechanism that could be replicated across the rest of the system. The lesson of BUET for higher education reform is not that political bans on student organizations are the solution to the problem of politicization, but that it is possible, under the right conditions, to maintain institutional cultures that prioritize academic achievement over political competition, and that the conditions include strong and consistent institutional leadership, a student body with high academic aspirations, and a social recognition that the institution's academic reputation is valuable and worth protecting.

The technical university sector has expanded significantly since BUET's establishment. Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology (CUET), Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET), Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), and Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology (DUET) have been established to extend technical higher education to more regions of the country. Several specialized universities have been established in areas like textile engineering, maritime studies, and digital university models. But the quality differential between BUET and the other technical universities is substantial, reflecting differences in resource allocation, faculty quality, institutional culture, and the degree of political distortion in their governance and operations.

7.2 Agricultural Universities and Rural Development

The agricultural universities, including the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) at Mymensingh established in 1961, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University (BSMRAU), Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, and several others, serve an important developmental function in a country where agriculture remains the primary livelihood of a large proportion of the population and where the improvement of agricultural productivity, resilience

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to climate change, and the development of value chains from farm to market are critical economic priorities.

The performance of Bangladesh's agricultural universities in generating research relevant to these priorities has been mixed. Agricultural research has produced some genuine contributions to Bangladesh's agricultural development: the development and diffusion of high-yielding variety rice that contributed to Bangladesh's food security, the adaptation of agricultural practices to the specific conditions of the delta environment, and contributions to the development of aquaculture that have made Bangladesh one of the world's leading producers of freshwater fish. But the capacity of agricultural universities to conduct the kind of applied research that farmers, rural enterprises, and policy-makers need is constrained by the same resource limitations, governance problems, and research culture weaknesses that afflict the rest of the university system.

The relationship between agricultural universities and the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), and other agricultural research institutions outside the university system is also worth examining. Bangladesh has developed a significant publicly funded agricultural research system outside the universities, and the coordination between this system and the agricultural universities has been limited, resulting in duplication of effort and missed opportunities for the synergies between university research training and applied research capacity that effective agricultural innovation systems generate.

7.3 Distance Education and Open University

The Bangladesh Open University (BOU), established under the Bangladesh Open University Act 1992, is in terms of enrollment one of the largest educational institutions in Bangladesh, serving approximately 1.8 million students through distance learning programs at secondary, higher secondary, undergraduate, and postgraduate levels. Its mandate is to provide access to education for those who cannot attend conventional face-to-face institutions because of geographic, economic, or other constraints, including working adults, rural residents without access to urban university campuses, and women whose mobility is constrained by social norms or domestic responsibilities.

The potential of open and distance education as a mechanism for dramatically expanding access to quality higher education in a country the size and shape of Bangladesh is enormous. Distance education can reach students in remote char islands and hill tract communities who cannot relocate to Dhaka or other university centers. It can accommodate the time constraints of working adults who need to upgrade their qualifications while maintaining their employment. And it can potentially deliver high-quality educational content at a fraction of the per-student cost of face-to-face instruction, through economies of scale in the production of learning materials and the use of increasingly powerful digital technologies for content delivery, assessment, and learner support.

The reality of BOU's performance is considerably more modest than its potential. BOU has struggled with the quality of its learning materials, the adequacy of its learner support systems, and the credibility of its assessment processes. Its graduates face significant discrimination in the

labor market, with many employers refusing to consider BOU qualifications as equivalent to those of conventional face-to-face universities. The digitization of BOU's operations, which is a prerequisite for the effective use of the distance education technologies that could transform its quality, has been slow and inconsistent.

The reform of BOU and the development of a genuinely high-quality open and distance higher education system is one of the most important opportunities in Bangladesh's higher education landscape, because it is the mechanism through which the aspiration of universal access to higher education can most plausibly be achieved within realistic resource constraints. International experience, particularly from the Open University of Sri Lanka, the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, and the Open University in the United Kingdom, demonstrates that open and distance education can achieve genuine quality if it is adequately resourced, well-governed, and systematically evaluated. Bangladesh has not yet made the sustained investment that this quality achievement requires, but the aspiration and the organizational infrastructure exist, and with appropriate reform and investment, BOU could become a genuine force for educational equity and access.

Chapter Eight: Higher Education and Democratic Values -- The University as Civic Institution

8.1 Academic Freedom and Democratic Culture

The relationship between universities and democratic culture runs deeper than the formal protection of academic freedom, important as that is. Universities shape democratic culture not only through their explicit political activities but through the intellectual habits, the modes of argumentation, and the norms of public discourse that they cultivate in their graduates. A university system that teaches students to think critically, to evaluate evidence carefully, to argue with intellectual honesty, and to engage respectfully with perspectives they disagree with is making a contribution to democratic culture that extends far beyond the campus. Conversely, a university system that teaches students to reproduce received opinions without questioning them, to defer to authority rather than to reason, and to value social and political conformity over intellectual integrity is actively undermining the epistemic foundations of democracy.

The diagnosis of Bangladesh's higher education system from this perspective is deeply troubling. The rote-learning culture that dominates university education, shaped by the same examination pressures that distort secondary education, systematically discourages the development of critical thinking. The politicization of university life, in which students learn that success depends on political affiliation rather than intellectual merit, teaches lessons about the relationship between power and knowledge that are profoundly anti-democratic. And the culture of intellectual intimidation, in which academics who express inconvenient views face professional consequences, models a relationship between authority and knowledge that is incompatible with the free inquiry that both academic excellence and democratic culture require.

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The 2024 student uprising provided a dramatic demonstration of what happens when the democratic impulse that universities are supposed to cultivate asserts itself against a system that has systematically suppressed it. The students who led the uprising were, in an important sense, acting out of the democratic values that their university education was supposed to cultivate, even though the universities themselves had been complicit in the authoritarian system those students were overthrowing. This suggests that the democratic impulse, while suppressed and distorted by the politicization of university life, has not been entirely extinguished. The question is how to create institutional conditions in which this impulse can find constructive and sustained expression in the academic life of the university rather than only in the periodic eruptions of political crisis that Bangladesh's university campuses have witnessed throughout their history.

8.2 The University and Civil Society

Bangladesh has a remarkable civil society, including one of the world's largest and most innovative development organizations in BRAC, a vibrant independent media, a strong tradition of human rights advocacy, and a range of think tanks, research organizations, and advocacy groups that contribute to public policy debate and social development. The relationship between this civil society and the university system is important but underdeveloped.

Universities should be the intellectual foundation of civil society: the places where the ideas, the evidence, the analytical frameworks, and the trained personnel that civil society organizations need for their work are generated and developed. But in Bangladesh, the relationship is more often reversed: civil society organizations, NGOs, and international development organizations provide a significant proportion of the research funding and professional development opportunities that sustain the most productive academic work, while the universities themselves provide relatively limited intellectual leadership to the civil society ecosystem.

The development of stronger and more mutually productive relationships between universities and civil society, including mechanisms for university-based research to inform and strengthen civil society advocacy, for civil society experience and knowledge to enrich university teaching and research, and for universities and civil society organizations to collaborate in the development of evidence-based approaches to Bangladesh's most important development challenges, is an important dimension of higher education reform that is rarely addressed in policy discussions focused primarily on governance, quality, and labor market relevance.

8.3 The Dhaka University Legacy and Its Future

The Dhaka University deserves special mention in any discussion of higher education's relationship to democratic culture in Bangladesh, because it is the institution that has historically been most central to this relationship. The University of Dhaka has been, at its best moments, genuinely the intellectual heart of the nation: the place where the ideas that shaped Bangladesh's political and cultural life were generated, contested, and refined, the institution that produced the intellectual leadership of the independence movement and the democratic movements that followed.

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The contemporary condition of Dhaka University is a painful contrast with this historical legacy. Chronic session jams, a campus physically deteriorated from the magnificent institution of the early post-independence period, halls of residence controlled by partisan student organizations, faculty appointments heavily influenced by political patronage, and a research output that is meager compared to the institution's resources and intellectual traditions: these are the features that currently define the university for most informed observers.

And yet Dhaka University remains uniquely important, for reasons that go beyond the nostalgia for its distinguished past. It remains the institution that attracts the most academically competitive students from across the country. Its faculty includes many of Bangladesh's most distinguished scholars. Its campus continues to be a site where political and intellectual culture intersect in ways that shape national life. The DUCSU elections of September 2025, with their surprising outcome and their signal of generational change in the student political culture, took place at Dhaka University, and their implications will ripple through Bangladesh's politics and intellectual life in ways that will unfold over years and decades.

The reform of Dhaka University is therefore not only an educational priority but a democratic one. A Dhaka University that is genuinely autonomous, genuinely committed to academic excellence, genuinely diverse in its intellectual culture, and genuinely supportive of the free inquiry and honest debate that democratic culture requires would be a very different institution from the one that exists today. Creating it requires the same combination of political will, sustained investment, institutional redesign, and cultural change that is needed to reform the higher education system as a whole, applied with particular intensity and urgency to the institution that is most central to Bangladesh's intellectual and democratic life.

Chapter Nine: Legal and Constitutional Dimensions of Higher Education

9.1 The Legislative Framework

The legislative framework governing higher education in Bangladesh is fragmented, inconsistent, and inadequately updated to reflect the current structure and challenges of the system. Each public university is governed by its own specific enabling act, which specifies its governance structure, the composition of its academic bodies, the powers and responsibilities of its principal officers, and the mechanisms through which it relates to the government and to the UGC. The result is a patchwork of legislation in which the governance arrangements of different universities differ significantly, making consistent reform and accountability difficult.

The absence of umbrella legislation for public universities, which would establish common standards for governance, academic freedom, quality assurance, and accountability across the public university sector, is a significant gap in the legal framework. The Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2018 to 2030 explicitly recommended the enactment of such umbrella legislation, recognizing that the current arrangement, in which each university is governed by its own specific legislation with no overarching framework, makes it impossible to implement consistent reforms or to hold universities to consistent standards. But the legislation has not been

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enacted, partly because of the political difficulties of reforming the governance of individual universities whose specific statutory arrangements suit the interests of the politicians and administrators who currently benefit from them.

The Private University Act 2010, which superseded the original 1992 act, established the governance and regulatory framework for private universities. The act has been amended several times since 2010, but it retains significant weaknesses. The governance structure it establishes, centering authority in a board of trustees dominated by investors rather than in an independent academic senate or governing board, creates the incentive problems for academic quality that we have already discussed. The accreditation framework established by the act, which relies primarily on the UGC for quality oversight rather than on a genuinely independent accreditation body, has not been effective at enforcing quality standards against politically connected institutions.

9.2 Autonomy, Accountability, and the Legal Definition of the University

One of the most fundamental and most frequently debated questions in the legal framework of higher education is the proper definition and scope of university autonomy. The autonomy of the university from political interference is a functional prerequisite for academic freedom and for the integrity of research and teaching. But autonomy without accountability, the freedom to operate without transparency or external scrutiny, can become a cover for incompetence, corruption, and the abuse of the institutional power that university leadership commands.

The legal framework governing Bangladeshi universities does not adequately balance autonomy and accountability. On the side of autonomy, the statutory provisions that are supposed to protect universities from political interference, including the Senate election provisions for vice-chancellor appointment in the major public universities, are systematically circumvented, and there is no effective legal remedy for this circumvention. On the side of accountability, the mechanisms for holding universities publicly accountable for their academic quality, their financial management, and their governance integrity are inadequate. The UGC's annual reports and its strategic planning documents are important sources of information about the state of the system, but they are not accompanied by enforcement mechanisms that would give their findings practical consequence.

The development of a legal framework that genuinely protects both university autonomy and university accountability requires several elements. It requires an autonomous accreditation body, established by statute with a clear mandate, adequate funding, and genuine independence from political interference, with powers to assess and publicly report on the academic quality of all higher education institutions and to recommend sanctions including the suspension of admissions against institutions that fail to meet minimum quality standards. It requires strengthened judicial protection for academic freedom, including clear statutory definitions of academic freedom, specific procedural protections for academics who face discipline for the exercise of academic freedom, and accessible legal remedies when those protections are violated. And it requires transparent financial reporting requirements for all higher education institutions, with independent audit and public disclosure of financial performance, that provide the information basis for public accountability.

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9.3 The Right to Higher Education and Its Legal Dimensions

The right to higher education is less firmly established in international and domestic law than the right to primary education, but it is not legally empty. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights establishes in Article 13 that higher education "shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education." This provision establishes a legal obligation to work toward the equalization of access to higher education on the basis of academic merit rather than economic background, and Bangladesh's current system, in which access to high-quality higher education is overwhelmingly determined by economic privilege, is significantly out of compliance with this obligation.

The domestic legal framework does not contain a specific right to higher education comparable to the right to primary education established by the 2010 act. This legal gap has significant practical consequences: it means that there is no constitutional or statutory basis on which an individual can challenge the educational system's failure to provide her with access to quality higher education commensurate with her academic ability but beyond her economic means. The development of a legal framework that progressively expands the right to higher education, through mechanisms such as need-based scholarships, student loan programs, and regulatory requirements for private universities to provide a minimum proportion of fee waivers for academically meritorious students from low-income backgrounds, would give legal force to the equity aspirations that are articulated in the policy documents but not currently backed by enforceable rights.

9.4 Intellectual Property and Academic Knowledge

The legal framework for intellectual property in the context of higher education deserves specific attention because it is a prerequisite for the university-industry research collaboration that Bangladesh's higher education development strategy identifies as an important mechanism for improving research relevance and funding. The Patents and Designs Act, various copyright provisions, and the emerging framework for the protection of traditional knowledge are all relevant to the legal environment for academic research and its commercial application.

The development of technology transfer offices in Bangladesh's leading universities, which is essential for the commercialization of university research through licensing, spin-off companies, and research contracts with industry, requires a clear legal framework for the ownership and commercialization of university-generated intellectual property. Who owns the intellectual property generated by a faculty member's research: the faculty member herself, the university, or the government as the source of the public funding that supports the university? What happens to intellectual property that is generated through research supported by international donors? How are the interests of traditional communities whose knowledge contributes to university research protected? These are questions that the current legal framework does not adequately address, and the absence of clear legal answers is a significant barrier to the development of effective university-industry research collaboration.

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Chapter Ten: Toward a Vision of Reformed Higher Education in Bangladesh

10.1 The Reformers' Dilemma

Anyone who has studied Bangladesh's higher education system and thought seriously about its reform faces a fundamental dilemma. The reforms that are needed are clear, relatively well understood, and have been stated repeatedly in successive strategic plans, commission reports, and policy analyses. But the same reports that state these reforms have been produced for decades without producing the reforms. This history of reform aspiration without reform implementation is not simply a story of government failure: it is a story about the structural features of the higher education system and its political economy that make reform persistently difficult to achieve.

The reforms that are needed include making vice-chancellor appointments genuinely merit-based and free from political patronage. Developing a genuinely independent accreditation system with real enforcement powers. Significantly increasing public investment in higher education, particularly in research. Developing mechanisms to extend access to quality higher education for students from low-income backgrounds. Reforming the curriculum and pedagogy of most university programs to develop genuine critical thinking and relevant competencies rather than rote memorization. Strengthening the legal protection of academic freedom. And reforming the National University system to improve the quality of the education provided through its two thousand affiliated colleges to the three million students who depend on them.

None of these reforms is technically complex or intellectually mysterious. The challenge is not understanding what needs to be done but creating the political and institutional conditions in which it can actually be done. And creating those conditions requires addressing the political economy of the higher education system, the set of interests, incentives, and power relationships that currently prevent the reforms from being implemented, even when their necessity is publicly acknowledged.

10.2 The Post-2024 Opportunity and Its Limits

The political revolution of August 2024 created, as we have noted in examining other dimensions of educational policy throughout this commentary, a moment of genuine opportunity for reform. The overthrow of a government that had comprehensively captured the institutions of the state, including the universities, for partisan purposes opened a window for institutional renewal. The interim government came to power with significant reform legitimacy and international goodwill. The student movement that drove the revolution had articulated, in its demands, many of the specific institutional reforms that the higher education system needs: genuine academic autonomy, merit-based governance, an end to partisan control of campus life.

The limits of this opportunity have become increasingly apparent as the post-revolution period has unfolded. The interim government, as the analysis of vice-chancellor appointments in the subsequent period demonstrates, succumbed to the same logic of political patronage that it had promised to overcome. Thirty vice-chancellors were appointed with links to pro-BNP and pro-Jamaat teachers' bodies, replicating in a different partisan key the same pattern of capture that the

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Awami League had practiced for fifteen years. The formation of a search committee in May 2025 came only after the administrative leadership of forty-seven public universities had already been filled by partisan appointment, making the committee's work a matter of form rather than substance for most of the institutions it was supposed to address. And the BNP government that subsequently took office has continued the pattern, appointing as the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University the physics professor who is simultaneously the education affairs secretary of the BNP.

This pattern of recurrence, in which each new government reproduces the same institutional capture it condemned in its predecessor, suggests that the reform of higher education governance cannot depend on the political will of any individual government or political actor. It requires the kind of institutional redesign that makes political capture of the university structurally impossible, or at minimum significantly more difficult and costly, regardless of the partisan character of the government in power.

10.3 Institutional Design for Academic Autonomy

The most important single element of higher education reform is the redesign of the institutional framework for university governance in ways that genuinely protect academic autonomy from political interference. This requires several specific institutional changes.

First, the vice-chancellor appointment process must be reformed to make it genuinely merit-based and politically neutral. The statutory provisions for Senate election of vice-chancellor candidates in the major public universities should be implemented as written rather than circumvented, and the Senate should be reformed if necessary to ensure that its membership reflects the academic community of the university rather than political patronage networks. Where Senate election is not currently provided for, new mechanisms should be established: independent search committees with transparent criteria, external review by distinguished academics from outside Bangladesh, and public accountability for appointment decisions that explains why the chosen candidate was selected over other candidates.

Second, the University Grants Commission must be genuinely independent of political direction. The appointment of UGC chairman and board members should be through a process that ensures genuine academic distinction and independence rather than partisan loyalty: a process analogous to the best international practices for independent regulatory body appointments, including fixed non-renewable terms, transparent selection criteria, and parliamentary confirmation. The UGC's regulatory functions should be clearly separated from its funding functions, and its enforcement powers should be strengthened so that it can take meaningful action against institutions that fail quality standards regardless of those institutions' political connections.

Third, an independent accreditation system should be established, organizationally distinct from both the government and the UGC, and governed by a board that includes distinguished academics, employers, and other stakeholders but is not subject to government direction. This accreditation system should develop and apply transparent quality standards for all types of higher education institution, should conduct regular institutional reviews, and should have the authority to withdraw accreditation from institutions that persistently fail to meet those

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standards, with the withdrawal of accreditation triggering the loss of the institution's degree-granting authority.

10.4 Research Investment and the National Research Council

The development of a serious research capacity in Bangladesh's universities requires sustained, significant, and well-managed public investment in research. The establishment of a National Research Council, recommended in the Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2018 to 2030 but not yet implemented, would provide the institutional mechanism for allocating research funding on a competitive, peer-reviewed basis rather than through the patronage channels that currently distribute the limited research resources available.

A well-designed National Research Council would fund research through transparent competition in which proposals are evaluated by peer reviewers on the basis of academic merit and national relevance, not political affiliation. It would maintain a portfolio of research funding that balances fundamental research with applied research of clear social and economic relevance. It would include mechanisms for international collaboration that allow Bangladeshi researchers to access global knowledge networks and contribute to them. And it would develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks that allow the quality and impact of funded research to be assessed and communicated to the public and policy-makers.

The funding for a National Research Council of meaningful scale would require a significant increase in public investment in higher education research. A target of at least one percent of GDP for total research and development expenditure, from the current level of approximately 0.3 percent, while ambitious and requiring a phased approach over many years, would place Bangladesh in the range of comparable middle-income countries and would provide the financial foundation for a genuine research culture in the university system. The political case for this investment rests on the evidence that research and development expenditure is strongly associated with economic productivity, innovation capacity, and the development of the knowledge economy that Bangladesh's long-term development strategy requires.

10.5 Access, Equity, and the Student Loan System

Addressing the profound inequities in access to quality higher education in Bangladesh requires a combination of demand-side and supply-side measures. On the demand side, the development of a properly designed student loan program, which would allow students from all economic backgrounds to finance quality higher education with repayment from subsequent earnings, is the most important single access reform. Student loan programs have been implemented in diverse national contexts from the United Kingdom to Australia to South Korea, and the design features that determine their success, including income-contingent repayment provisions that protect borrowers from unmanageable debt burdens if their earnings are low, adequate loan limits that cover the actual cost of quality education rather than only a fraction of it, and institutional infrastructure for disbursement and collection, are well-understood from this international experience.

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On the supply side, expanding the capacity of the public university system to accommodate more students from across the economic spectrum is an important complement to demand-side measures. This does not require the establishment of more public universities in the simple sense: it requires improving the quality and expanding the capacity of existing institutions, particularly the National University's affiliated college network, so that more students can access higher education of genuine quality rather than the credential-without-substance that many National University colleges currently provide.

The development of need-based scholarship programs for students in private universities, potentially funded through a combination of government appropriation and mandatory contributions from private universities whose profitability makes a contribution feasible, could help to reduce the effective cost of private university education for academically meritorious students from lower-income backgrounds. The design of such a program must be careful to avoid two pitfalls: making it so modest in scale that it provides only symbolic access for a tiny number of beneficiaries, and making it susceptible to the corruption and patronage that have affected other scholarship programs in Bangladesh.

10.6 The National University Reform

The reform of the National University and its affiliated college system is the single most important higher education policy challenge in terms of the number of students affected. Three million students deserve more than the credential-without-substance that many of the colleges affiliated with the National University currently provide, and any serious vision of higher education reform in Bangladesh must include a credible plan for improving the quality of education in this part of the system.

The reform of the National University requires a comprehensive approach that addresses simultaneously the governance of the affiliated colleges, the quality of their faculty, the adequacy of their physical and digital infrastructure, the relevance and currency of their curricula, and the meaningfulness of their assessment and examination processes. This is a formidable agenda, and it will require sustained investment and institutional commitment over many years.

Some specific elements of this reform agenda are relatively clear. The academic governance of affiliated colleges needs to be strengthened, with more regular and more meaningful academic oversight by the National University. The faculty qualifications requirements for teaching positions in affiliated colleges need to be raised and enforced, with a credible program of in-service professional development for existing faculty who do not yet meet higher standards. The curriculum needs to be updated more systematically and more frequently to reflect current developments in the relevant academic fields. And the examination system needs to be reformed to assess genuine understanding and capability rather than rote memorization, with the marking and result-reporting processes significantly improved to reduce delays and improve the reliability of results.

The digitization of the National University's operations, including its student registration, examination management, result-reporting, and quality monitoring functions, is a prerequisite for

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the more systematic management of a system of this scale. The Bangladesh Open University's experience with distance learning technology, for all its limitations, provides some relevant lessons for the development of digital learning resources that could supplement and improve the quality of instruction in affiliated colleges, particularly in the subjects and regions where qualified face-to-face teaching is most scarce.

Conclusion to Part Nine: The University Bangladesh Deserves

The analysis developed through this part's ten chapters can be summarized in a single observation: Bangladesh's higher education system is failing, systematically and preventably, to serve the three most important functions that justify the university as a social institution. It is failing the individual students who invest their time, their families' resources, and their aspirations in it, by providing them with education that is too often of poor quality, insufficiently relevant to the lives they will actually live, and structured by perverse incentives that reward conformity over critical thinking. It is failing the economy and society that funds it, by producing graduates whose skills fall short of what a dynamic knowledge economy requires, by failing to generate the research and innovation that are the distinctive contributions of the university to economic development, and by reproducing rather than challenging the social inequalities that prevent Bangladesh from achieving its developmental potential. And it is failing the democracy that needs it, by modeling intellectual submission rather than free inquiry, by tolerating a campus culture of political intimidation rather than fostering the habits of democratic deliberation, and by allowing the capture of its governance by partisan politics rather than defending the institutional autonomy that is the precondition of both academic excellence and democratic service.

None of these failures is inevitable. The resources needed to begin addressing them are available, not in unlimited quantities, but in sufficient quantities to make a meaningful start. The knowledge of what needs to be done is not lacking: it has been documented, analyzed, and recommended in successive policy reports for decades. What is lacking is the political will to confront the institutional interests and the structural incentives that maintain the status quo, and the organizational capacity to implement reforms with the consistency and follow-through that sustainable institutional change requires.

The student movement of 2024 demonstrated that the desire for a different kind of university is alive in Bangladesh and is capable of transforming political landscapes when it is mobilized with sufficient courage and clarity of purpose. The challenge now is to translate that transformative energy into the patient, sustained, and structurally informed work of institutional reform that can create the university system Bangladesh deserves: a system that is genuinely academically free, genuinely oriented toward excellence, genuinely accessible across economic boundaries, genuinely committed to the research mission that is the university's unique contribution to the advancement of knowledge, and genuinely dedicated to the formation of the thinking, questioning, democratically engaged citizens that Bangladesh's future requires.

The children of Bangladesh who enter universities today should be able to expect that they are entering institutions dedicated to the pursuit of truth, the cultivation of their intellectual

capacities, and the formation of their characters as citizens and as human beings. They should be able to expect that their academic achievements will be recognized and rewarded on the basis of their merit rather than their political connections. They should be able to expect that the knowledge and the skills they develop in university will genuinely prepare them for productive, meaningful, and autonomous lives. And they should be able to expect that the university will stand, as it has at its best historical moments, as a space of free thought, honest inquiry, and democratic aspiration, a place where the Bangladesh they want to build can be imagined, argued for, and prepared.

Part Ten of this commentary, the final part, will synthesize the analysis developed throughout the entire work, drawing together the threads of philosophy, history, governance, economics, law, pedagogy, and comparative analysis to construct a comprehensive and forward-looking account of what the reform of Bangladesh's education system requires, why it has proven so persistently difficult to achieve, and what the most promising paths forward look like in the specific political and institutional context of post-2024 Bangladesh. It will engage with the most fundamental questions that this commentary has raised throughout: What is education for? What kind of society does Bangladesh want to become? And what kind of educational system will it need to build that society?

Supplementary Commentary: The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Higher Education

The term "Fourth Industrial Revolution," popularized by World Economic Forum founder Klaus Schwab in his 2016 book of the same name, refers to the convergence of digital, biological, and physical technologies that is transforming economic production, labor markets, social organization, and the very nature of human experience in the early twenty-first century. Artificial intelligence, robotics, the Internet of Things, advanced materials, quantum computing, and biotechnology are among the technologies that define this revolution, and their collective impact on the kinds of work that humans do, the skills that productive employment requires, and the social institutions that mediate between technological capability and human well-being is profound and accelerating.

The implications for higher education in Bangladesh are direct and urgent. The Financial Express, in its analysis of higher education reform, noted that Bangladesh faces a "particularly intense" human capital challenge because "while Bangladesh faces many challenges in rapidly adapting to ongoing technological changes in the global production processes related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the human capital task is particularly intense given the present low levels of education and skill." The skills that the Fourth Industrial Revolution makes most valuable, including complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to collaborate with artificial intelligence systems rather than compete with them, are precisely the skills that Bangladesh's higher education system is least effective at developing.

The particular challenge that artificial intelligence poses to Bangladesh's higher education system deserves explicit attention. The rapid advance of large language models and other AI systems is transforming the landscape of intellectual work in ways that affect the value of different

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educational outcomes. In a world where AI systems can rapidly produce competent text, perform routine data analysis, translate between languages, and navigate large bodies of information to answer specific questions, the education that most clearly retains its value is education that develops the distinctively human capacities that AI systems cannot replicate: deep conceptual understanding, ethical judgment, creative synthesis, empathetic engagement, and the ability to ask new questions rather than merely answer existing ones. These are, strikingly, the capacities that a genuinely liberal education, in the philosophical tradition of Dewey, Newman, and Tagore, has always valued most. The challenge of higher education reform in the age of AI is therefore not to redesign education around new technical skills but to implement, finally and seriously, the educational values that the best educational philosophy has always advocated: the cultivation of genuinely thinking, genuinely free, genuinely creative human beings.

Bangladesh's universities that rush to incorporate AI literacy into their curricula as a technical add-on, while leaving the underlying culture of rote memorization and intellectual conformity unchanged, will be preparing their students for a world that is already passing rather than for the world that is coming. The more fundamental transformation, the development of a genuine culture of intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and creative engagement with knowledge, is the educational response to the Fourth Industrial Revolution that will actually serve Bangladesh's students and society.

Supplementary Commentary: The International Dimensions of Bangladesh's Higher Education

Bangladesh's higher education system operates in an increasingly internationalized context, and understanding this context is important for any comprehensive account of the system's challenges and opportunities. Three dimensions of internationalization are particularly relevant: the mobility of students and faculty, the globalization of academic publishing and research, and the growing engagement of international development organizations in higher education reform.

The outward mobility of Bangladeshi students to universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and increasingly Malaysia, China, and other Asian destinations, is a growing and significant phenomenon. The number of Bangladeshi students enrolled in foreign universities has grown substantially over the past decade, driven by the inadequacy of domestic higher education options for the most academically ambitious students and by the availability of scholarships and financial support from foreign governments and universities. This outward mobility is a form of brain drain, a loss of Bangladesh's most able young people to the benefit of other countries' economies and institutions, but it is also a form of international engagement that brings Bangladeshi students into contact with the best universities in the world and potentially builds the knowledge, the networks, and the international perspective that could contribute to Bangladesh's development if these students eventually return.

The growth of Chinese universities' recruitment of Bangladeshi students through scholarship programs, particularly for engineering, medicine, and technology programs, is a relatively recent and increasingly significant development. China has been investing heavily in attracting students from developing countries as part of its Belt and Road Initiative's soft power strategy, and

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Bangladesh is a priority destination for this investment. The academic quality of Chinese universities varies significantly, and the implications for Bangladeshi students of studying in a very different linguistic and cultural environment with a very different academic culture are complex. But the expansion of educational options for Bangladeshi students who cannot access opportunities in the English-speaking world is a real benefit, and the growing number of Bangladeshi graduates with academic experience in Chinese institutions will have implications for Bangladesh's relationship with China that go beyond the educational dimension.

The engagement of international development organizations in Bangladesh's higher education has been predominantly positive in its ambitions, providing funding, technical assistance, and international expertise for quality improvement initiatives that would not have been financially or organizationally possible without external support. The World Bank's Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) was Bangladesh's first significant external support for higher education quality improvement, and it laid important institutional foundations, including the Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN) and the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) of the UGC. But the engagement of international organizations also carries risks that require careful management: the risk that the research agenda of Bangladesh's universities is shaped by international donor priorities rather than national intellectual needs; the risk that reform approaches developed in very different contexts are imported without adequate adaptation; and the risk that dependence on external funding for quality improvement delays the development of the domestic political will and institutional capacity needed for sustainable self-directed reform.

Part Ten, the concluding part of this commentary, will synthesize the analysis developed throughout the ten-part work into a comprehensive and forward-looking account of the philosophy, politics, and practice of educational reform in Bangladesh, addressing the fundamental question of what it would take to create, in the specific context of post-2024 Bangladesh, an educational system that genuinely serves the aspirations of its people and the requirements of a just, democratic, and prosperous society.

PART TEN: SYNTHESIS, REFORM, AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL IN BANGLADESH

Prologue to Part Ten: The Question That Will Not Go Away

This is the concluding part of a commentary that has traveled far and wide across the terrain of education in Bangladesh. We have traversed the ancient Buddhist Viharas of the Rajshahi plains and the colonial classrooms of Calcutta. We have examined the constitutional arrangements of 1972 and the political catastrophes of 2024. We have read the philosophical arguments of Al-Ghazali and Paulo Freire, of John Dewey and Rabindranath Tagore, of Ibn Khaldun and Jean Piaget, and asked with each what they have to say to the teacher standing before forty-seven children in a government primary school in Sirajganj. We have analyzed the budget allocations

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and the exam results, the governance structures and the legal frameworks, the private universities and the public ones, the Madrasa students and the English-medium students, the rural girls who drop out in Class Eight and the Dhaka University professors who have never published a peer-reviewed paper.

And through all of this analysis, one question has surfaced, submerged, and resurfaced with the insistence of a truth that refuses to be dismissed. The question is not technical. It is not administrative. It is not even, at root, political, though politics plays its role. The question is philosophical, and it is this: What is education for in Bangladesh?

This question may appear to have an obvious answer. Education is for development. Education is for economic growth. Education is for national progress. These are the answers that appear in policy documents, in ministerial speeches, in the reports of international development organizations. And they are not wrong answers, precisely, but they are incomplete in a way that is philosophically significant and practically consequential. They answer one part of the question while leaving another part, arguably the more important part, untouched.

Education is also for the formation of human beings. Not human resources. Not skilled workers. Not GDP contributors. Human beings: persons with inner lives, with moral sensibilities, with the capacity for beauty and for suffering, with the need for meaning and for belonging, with the right to dignity and to self-determination. If the education system of Bangladesh is to be genuinely reformed rather than merely reorganized, this fuller answer to the question of what education is for must be taken seriously, must be placed at the center of the reforming project, and must be allowed to challenge and complicate the purely instrumental visions of education that currently dominate the policy conversation.

Part Ten undertakes this synthesis. It brings together the threads of philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, history, law, political economy, and comparative analysis that have been woven through the preceding nine parts, and it attempts to weave them into a comprehensive, critical, and genuinely forward-looking account of what educational reform in Bangladesh requires, why it has proven so persistently difficult to achieve, and what the most promising paths forward look like in the specific institutional and political context of Bangladesh in 2026.

Chapter One: The Synthesis of Philosophy and System - Returning to First Principles

1.1 Why Philosophy Precedes Strategy

Every serious attempt at educational reform must begin with philosophy. This is not a statement about academic preference or intellectual habit. It is a claim about the logical structure of educational decision-making. Before one can decide what kind of teacher training to invest in, one must know what kind of teaching one wants to produce. Before one can design a curriculum, one must know what kind of knowledge one thinks is worth transmitting and what kind of person one hopes will emerge from the process of receiving and engaging with that knowledge. Before one can design an examination system, one must know what one thinks education is actually for

and therefore what aspects of a student's development are worth measuring and what aspects are not captured by measurement at all.

The trouble with educational reform in Bangladesh, as this commentary has argued throughout, is that it has consistently tried to perform the strategic operations without first performing the philosophical ones. Reform after reform has proceeded on the basis of assumptions about education's purpose that were never explicitly stated, never critically examined, and never subjected to the kind of sustained public deliberation that decisions of such fundamental importance to the life of the nation deserve. The result is a series of reforms that are internally incoherent, that pull in contradictory directions, and that fail not primarily for lack of funding or administrative capacity, though both are real problems, but for lack of a coherent philosophical foundation.

Consider the 2021 National Curriculum Framework, which the Awami League government developed and which the interim government largely set aside in 2024 before the BNP government further revised its trajectory. This curriculum was built on what its architects described as a social constructivist theory of learning. It drew explicitly on Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, on Dewey's philosophy of learning through experience, and on contemporary competency-based education frameworks developed by the OECD and UNESCO. In many respects, it was a philosophically serious document. It asked real questions about what competencies Bangladeshi students should have and attempted to design learning experiences that would develop those competencies.

But the curriculum framework contained a fundamental philosophical contradiction that was never resolved. It claimed to be oriented toward the development of critical thinking, creativity, and independent judgment. And it was simultaneously being implemented in an educational system governed by high-stakes standardized examinations, by a culture of rote memorization that had been entrenched for generations, by a teacher workforce that had itself been educated entirely within the rote-learning tradition, and by a political culture that treated intellectual conformity as a virtue and independent judgment as a threat. The philosophical premises of the curriculum were incompatible with the institutional realities within which it was supposed to operate, and no amount of textbook revision or in-service teacher training, conducted at the pace and scale that was actually achieved, was going to bridge that gap.

The lesson is not that the social constructivist philosophy was wrong. The lesson is that philosophy without institutional analysis is wishful thinking, and institutional reform without philosophical clarity is mere rearrangement. Genuine educational reform requires both: a clear and consistent philosophical account of what education is for, and a rigorous and honest analysis of the institutional conditions that would need to change to make the philosophical vision achievable.

1.2 Three Philosophical Traditions and Their Claims on Bangladesh

This commentary has introduced and engaged with several philosophical traditions that are relevant to education in Bangladesh. At the conclusion of the work, it is worth bringing these

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traditions into direct dialogue with one another, not to declare a winner, but to understand what each tradition offers and what each tradition demands.

The first tradition, which we may call the tradition of formation, encompasses both the Islamic educational philosophy of figures like Al-Ghazali and the Tagorean humanistic tradition, different as these two are in their specific content and orientation. What they share is the conviction that education is fundamentally a process of forming the whole human being: not merely filling the mind with information or training the hands for useful work, but cultivating the soul, developing moral character, awakening the sensibility to beauty and to the sacred, and forming a person who knows not merely how to do things but how to live. For Al-Ghazali, this formation happens through the discipline of the Madrasa, through sustained engagement with revealed knowledge and its rational elaboration, through the cultivation of taqwa, the God-consciousness that is the foundation of Islamic moral character. For Tagore, it happens through art and music and nature, through creative engagement with the rich cultural inheritance of Bengal, through the cultivation of a person who is at once deeply rooted in her own soil and genuinely open to the world.

The demand that this tradition places on Bangladesh's educational system is substantial and, in the current institutional context, largely unmet. A system oriented toward formation does not reduce its students to their examination scores. It does not sort them at age fourteen into science, arts, and commerce streams as if their intellectual identity were already fixed. It does not treat knowledge as a commodity to be acquired and exchanged for credentials. It asks of its teachers that they be not merely technically competent but genuinely educated, genuinely alive to the things they are trying to communicate, genuinely committed to the development of the whole person in front of them. This is an enormously demanding standard, and one that the current system of teacher recruitment, training, and compensation is nowhere near meeting.

The second tradition is the tradition of liberation, represented most powerfully in this commentary by Paulo Freire but also present in the various strands of feminist educational theory, critical race theory, and decolonial pedagogy that have enriched and complicated Freire's original framework. For this tradition, education is fundamentally a political practice. The educational system does not stand above or outside the structures of social power. It is a site at which those structures are reproduced, challenged, or transformed. The banking model of education, in which the powerful deposit their preferred version of knowledge into the minds of the powerless, is not a neutral or merely inefficient pedagogical practice. It is an instrument of social control. The alternative, dialogical education that begins from the experience and the questions of the learner and that cultivates the critical consciousness to analyze and challenge the social conditions that shape that experience, is not merely a better pedagogy. It is a form of political action.

The demand that this tradition places on Bangladesh's educational system is equally substantial and equally unmet. A system oriented toward liberation must take seriously the experiences of marginalized students: the girl from a Char community who walks four kilometers to reach a school with no toilet and three teachers for five hundred students; the Adivasi child in the Chittagong Hill Tracts whose language is not the medium of instruction and whose cultural identity is invisible in the curriculum; the child from a Dalit family in an urban slum who faces

discrimination in a classroom in which the teacher's expectations of her are conditioned by the social hierarchy that surrounds the school. Taking these experiences seriously means not only acknowledging them in official rhetoric but fundamentally redesigning the educational system to address the structural conditions that produce them. This requires a political will that the educational system alone cannot generate.

The third tradition is the tradition of civic formation, which draws primarily on Dewey but also on the republican educational philosophies of figures like Hannah Arendt and the contemporary capabilities approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. For this tradition, education is fundamentally about the formation of democratic citizens: persons who possess the intellectual capacities, the social sensibilities, and the political habits necessary for participation in a democratic community. Dewey understood the school as a miniature democratic community, a place where children learn democracy by practicing it, where they develop the habits of inquiry, of deliberation, of respectful engagement with perspectives different from their own, that democratic life requires. Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach shifts the focus from the inputs of education, what the system provides, to its outputs in terms of the genuine freedoms and functionings that people are actually able to exercise in their lives, a framework that demands attention not merely to the formal provision of educational opportunity but to the real differences in what students are actually able to do and be as a result of their education.

The demand that this tradition places on Bangladesh is, once again, deeply challenging. A system oriented toward civic formation does not prepare students primarily for examinations. It prepares them for active citizenship: for the capacity to understand the political and social world they inhabit, to participate in its democratic processes, to hold power to account, to engage constructively with fellow citizens across differences of class, religion, ethnicity, and gender. The events of July and August 2024, in which the students of Bangladesh demonstrated in the most dramatic possible way that this civic capacity exists and that it is capable of transforming political landscapes, are both a testament to the vitality of the democratic spirit in Bangladeshi youth and an indictment of an educational system that has tried to suppress rather than cultivate that spirit. The students who brought down Sheikh Hasina's government were, in a real sense, practicing the kind of citizenship that Dewey imagined the school would produce. They were doing so despite the school, not because of it.

1.3 Toward a Synthetic Educational Philosophy for Bangladesh

What would a synthetic educational philosophy for Bangladesh look like, one that takes seriously the legitimate claims of all three traditions while being grounded in the specific historical, cultural, social, and institutional context of a predominantly Muslim, postcolonial, developing democracy in 2026?

Such a philosophy would begin by affirming the priority of human formation over credential production. The central purpose of education in Bangladesh, as everywhere, is to help human beings become more fully human: to develop their intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and social capacities, to cultivate their ability to live well and to live together, and to form persons who are capable of contributing to and benefiting from the common life of the community. Credential production is a secondary purpose, important in its proper place but always subordinate to the

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primary one. When credential production drives out human formation entirely, as it threatens to do in Bangladesh's high-stakes examination culture, education has lost its way.

A synthetic philosophy for Bangladesh would also affirm the irreducibly social character of education. The Islamic tradition, the Tagorean tradition, the Freirean tradition, and the Deweyan tradition all converge on this point: education is not merely a transaction between an individual teacher and an individual student. It is a social practice embedded in a particular community with a particular history, a particular culture, and particular social structures of power and inequality. A philosophy adequate to Bangladesh's situation must take seriously both the richness of the communities and cultures within which Bangladeshi education takes place and the structural inequalities that those communities contain and that the educational system too often reproduces.

A synthetic philosophy for Bangladesh would further affirm the importance of the intellectual inheritance that each of Bangladesh's major educational traditions has preserved and transmitted. The Madrasa tradition has preserved and transmitted a rich body of Islamic intellectual culture, including philosophy, jurisprudence, theology, and literature, that represents a genuine and important contribution to the global heritage of human thought. The Bengali literary and cultural tradition, anchored in the work of Tagore and the long line of poets, novelists, and thinkers who preceded and followed him, is a resource of extraordinary richness for the formation of educated Bangladeshi persons. The scientific and technical knowledge that is the inheritance of the modern university is a genuine achievement of human civilization that Bangladesh's students need access to and engagement with. None of these inheritances is in itself sufficient, and none is in itself irrelevant. A synthetic philosophy would affirm all of them while recognizing that their integration into a coherent educational project is a challenging and unfinished task.

And finally, a synthetic philosophy for Bangladesh would place justice at the center of its educational vision. The most fundamental problem with Bangladesh's education system is not its curriculum design or its examination system or its teacher training, though all of these are genuine problems. The most fundamental problem is its profound injustice: its systematic provision of dramatically better educational opportunities to those who are already privileged, and its systematic failure of those who are already marginalized. A philosophy adequate to this problem does not merely call for better education for the poor as a development strategy. It demands better education for the poor as a requirement of justice, as a recognition of the equal dignity and the equal human potential of every child regardless of the class, the gender, the religion, or the geographical location into which she was born.

Chapter Two: The Political Economy of Educational Stagnation

2.1 Why Good Ideas Do Not Become Good Policies

Bangladesh does not suffer from a shortage of good ideas about educational reform. The country has produced, over the decades since independence, a substantial body of thoughtful analysis of its educational problems and of the reforms that are needed to address them. The Qudrat-i-Khuda Commission of 1972, the first comprehensive educational review of independent Bangladesh,

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articulated with remarkable clarity a vision of education as a democratic, secularist, and developmentally transformative enterprise. Subsequent commissions and policy reviews, including the National Education Policy of 2010 and the National Curriculum Framework of 2021, have built on this foundation and in many cases deepened and extended it. The Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2018 to 2030, the work of CAMPE and other civil society organizations, and the substantial body of academic research on Bangladesh's education system produced by Bangladeshi scholars in partnership with international colleagues have together created a rich body of knowledge about what needs to change and in many cases about how it can be changed.

And yet the fundamental problems of Bangladesh's education system: the low learning outcomes, the high dropout rates among the poor, the credential inflation, the teacher quality crisis, the politicization of university governance, the chronic underfinvestment, remain stubbornly persistent. The reforms that everyone agrees are needed are not implemented. The commitments that are made in policy documents are not followed through in budget allocations or in administrative action. The commissions that are established produce recommendations that sit on shelves.

Why? The answer lies in the political economy of Bangladesh's education system: the set of interests, incentives, and power relationships that determine who benefits from the current system and who would bear the costs of changing it, and that therefore shape what reforms are politically feasible and which are not.

The political economy of Bangladesh's education system is complex, but several key features can be identified that go a long way toward explaining the persistence of the status quo.

2.2 The Coaching Industry and Its Political Economy

One of the most significant and least analyzed features of Bangladesh's educational political economy is the private coaching and tutoring industry. This industry has grown enormously over the past three decades and is now, by any reasonable estimate, one of the largest sectors of the Bangladeshi economy not captured in official statistics. Students at every level, from primary to pre-university, attend private coaching classes in substantial numbers. In urban areas, it is virtually universal for secondary school students preparing for the SSC and HSC examinations to attend coaching centers in addition to their regular school classes. In many cases, the school itself is little more than a formality, and the real educational transaction takes place in the coaching center.

The coaching industry represents a massive private expenditure on education by Bangladeshi families, an expenditure that falls disproportionately on middle-income households who cannot afford full private schooling but who are unwilling to rely on the quality of the government school system. The total annual expenditure on private coaching in Bangladesh has been estimated by various researchers at figures ranging from several billion to tens of billions of taka, though the informal and unregistered nature of much of the industry makes precise estimation impossible.

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The coaching industry has a profound and almost entirely negative effect on the quality of education in the government school system. It creates a perverse incentive structure in which teachers have an economic interest in teaching inadequately in school, because inadequate school teaching creates demand for the private coaching that supplements their often very modest official salaries. It concentrates educational advantage among those who can afford coaching, further widening the gap between the educational outcomes of wealthy and poor children. And it further entrenches the examination-focused, rote-learning culture that genuine educational reform needs to dismantle, because the coaching industry is entirely organized around examination preparation.

The political economy of coaching reform is difficult. The teachers who earn substantial incomes from coaching are an organized and politically connected interest group. The coaching center owners are a significant economic constituency. And the middle-class parents who have come to rely on coaching as a substitute for the quality that the school system fails to provide would resist reforms that removed this option before an adequate alternative was established. Any serious curriculum reform that shifted assessment away from rote examination performance would be resisted by an industry whose entire business model depends on teaching students to perform well on rote examinations.

2.3 The Examination Industrial Complex

Closely related to the coaching industry is what might be called the examination industrial complex: the dense network of institutions, practices, and interests that are organized around Bangladesh's extraordinarily elaborate and high-stakes public examination system. The SSC and HSC examinations, along with the various equivalent examinations for Madrasa students and the primary and junior secondary examinations that were at different points in force, represent a massive administrative and economic enterprise.

The examination system provides significant economic opportunities for a range of actors: examination board officials, paper-setters and markers who receive fees for their involvement in the examination process, the publishers and distributors of examination guides and model answers, and the providers of the various examination preparation services that the system generates. Each of these actors has an economic interest in the continuation of the examination system in its current form, and collectively they constitute a significant political lobby against reforms that would reduce the importance of standardized examinations.

More fundamentally, the examination system serves important social functions that make it difficult to reform even when its educational costs are widely acknowledged. In a society with deep inequalities of class, social network, and geographical location, the formal examination system provides what appears to be an objective and meritocratic basis for selection to educational opportunities and employment. A student from a rural government school who scores well on the SSC can, in principle, compete on the basis of her examination results with students from elite private schools in Dhaka. That this principle is more honored in aspiration than in reality, because the coaching and private schooling advantages of wealthy students distort even the examination results, does not reduce its political importance. Any reform that appeared

to undermine the meritocratic character of the examination system would face fierce resistance from the families and communities who depend on that system for social mobility.

The examination industrial complex is therefore one of the most powerful structural barriers to educational reform in Bangladesh. Reforming it requires not simply changing examination formats or reducing the number of examinations, as various reform proposals have suggested, but addressing the social functions that the examination system performs: providing a mechanism for social selection that is perceived as fair in a context where other selection mechanisms, including teacher assessment, school recommendation, and portfolio evaluation, are widely perceived as susceptible to corruption, nepotism, and social bias.

2.4 The Madrasah Constituency and Religious Politics

The Madrasa education system represents another major dimension of the political economy of educational reform in Bangladesh. As this commentary has emphasized throughout, the Madrasa system is not a monolithic entity but a complex and internally diverse field, ranging from the Aliya Madrasas that are formally integrated into the state education system to the Qawmi Madrasas that operate with substantially greater independence. The two systems together enroll millions of students and employ hundreds of thousands of teachers, representing a significant institutional constituency with substantial political weight.

The political economy of Madrasa reform is particularly sensitive because the Madrasa system is embedded in the religious identity and social networks of a large portion of Bangladesh's Muslim population. Any reform of the Madrasa system that is perceived as an attack on Islamic education, or as an attempt by a secularist state to subordinate Islamic knowledge to a secular curriculum, will encounter fierce resistance from organized religious constituencies that have demonstrated their capacity to mobilize significant political pressure. The Hefazat-e-Islam movement, which emerged in the 2010s and achieved substantial political influence under both the Awami League and subsequently, is the most visible but not the only expression of this organized religious constituency's political power.

At the same time, the failure to address the educational quality deficit in the Madrasa system, and the failure to create genuine pathways between the Madrasa system and the broader economy and higher education system, are serious injustices to the millions of Madrasa students who are being educated in a system that does not adequately prepare them for the economic and civic life of contemporary Bangladesh. Finding a way to improve the quality and expand the horizons of Madrasa education while respecting its religious character and the legitimate concerns of its constituency is one of the most complex and politically sensitive challenges of educational reform in Bangladesh.

The political resolution of this challenge requires something that Bangladesh's political culture has rarely been able to sustain: a genuine dialogue between the state and the Madrasa system that is premised on mutual respect rather than mutual suspicion, that acknowledges both the legitimate educational claims of religious communities and the state's legitimate interest in ensuring that all children receive an education that prepares them for full participation in national life. Whether the BNP government that took office in 2026, with its different but still complex

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relationship to organized religious constituencies, has the political capacity to sustain this dialogue remains one of the most important open questions in Bangladesh's educational future.

2.5 The Public University Political Economy

The political economy of Bangladesh's public university system, examined in detail in Part Nine, deserves brief recapitulation here in the broader context of educational political economy. The key insight is that the politicization of public university governance is not a dysfunction of the system but a feature of it, in the specific sense that it serves the interests of those who control it. Governments that control the appointment of vice-chancellors control the universities. Universities that are controlled by the government provide patronage opportunities for politically affiliated faculty and students. Student organizations affiliated with the governing party provide cadres for political mobilization, security for political events, and in some cases enforcement of political conformity through intimidation. The system works very well for those who control it. It works very badly for those who are supposed to benefit from it: the students, the society, and the democratic polity.

The reform of this system requires, as this commentary has consistently argued, institutional redesign that makes political capture structurally more difficult rather than dependence on the good intentions of particular political actors. The consistent finding throughout this commentary's analysis of the post-2024 period is that even political actors who came to power with genuine reform commitments have in practice succumbed to the logic of the system they inherited. This suggests that the reform of higher education governance in Bangladesh is a task for institution-building, for the creation of structures with incentives for autonomy and quality rather than incentives for political loyalty, not a task for political conversion.

Chapter Three: Decolonization of Knowledge and Curriculum - The Unfinished Project

3.1 The Colonial Legacy Revisited

This commentary began its historical analysis with the colonial intervention in Bengal's education system, examining Macaulay's Minute, the filtration theory, and the long-term consequences of a colonial educational project that was explicitly designed to produce a class of persons who were Indian in blood but English in intellectual formation. Part Ten, the synthesizing part, must return to this theme, because the decolonization of Bangladesh's educational knowledge and curriculum is an unfinished project that continues to shape the system's deepest problems.

The colonial legacy in Bangladesh's education is not merely historical. It is present in the structure of the curriculum, in the language policies of the education system, in the assessment frameworks, in the institutional models of the university, and in the fundamental orientation of educational aspiration. The aspiration toward English-medium education, which drives millions of Bangladeshi families to invest heavily in English-language schooling, is in significant part a colonial legacy: the deeply embedded belief that the English language is the gateway to

modernity, to economic opportunity, and to full participation in the global knowledge economy. This belief is not entirely wrong. English is genuinely important for many dimensions of global economic and intellectual participation. But its dominance in the hierarchy of educational aspiration in Bangladesh comes at a significant cost: the systematic devaluation of Bengali-medium education and of the Bengali intellectual tradition, and the creation of a linguistic hierarchy that corresponds closely to the social hierarchy of class.

Recent scholarship in the comparative and international education literature, including work published in 2024 and 2025 drawing on postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, has further developed the critique of this linguistic hierarchy. The concept of "epistemicide" introduced by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has particular relevance here: the systematic elimination or devaluation of non-Western ways of knowing through the dominance of the Western academic knowledge system. When Bangladesh's universities adopt curricula that are structured primarily around Western academic knowledge, that assess students using frameworks derived from Western educational philosophy, and that treat Bengali and Islamic intellectual traditions as objects of occasional curiosity rather than as living resources for the production of knowledge, they are participating in a continuing form of epistemicide. The decolonization of Bangladesh's university curriculum is therefore not merely a matter of adding a few courses on Bengali history or Islamic philosophy. It requires a more fundamental rethinking of what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is legitimate, and how the relationship between indigenous and global intellectual traditions should be organized.

3.2 The Language Question and Its Educational Dimensions

The language question is one of the most politically and culturally charged dimensions of the decolonization debate in Bangladesh, and it has a complexity that simple narratives of linguistic nationalism or of globalization tend to obscure.

Bangladesh's founding as a nation was intimately connected to a language movement. The Language Movement of 1952, in which students and intellectuals gave their lives for the right to use Bengali as an official language rather than being compelled to accept Urdu, is one of the foundational events of Bangladesh's national identity. The day on which the language martyrs fell, the 21st of February, is now celebrated as International Mother Language Day by UNESCO, a recognition of the universal significance of the principle for which they died. The right to education in one's mother language is a fundamental human right, and Bangladesh's experience of linguistic oppression under Pakistani rule gives this principle a particular depth of meaning.

Yet the educational language landscape of Bangladesh in 2026 is characterized by a profound and growing tension between this commitment to Bengali and the demand for English-language education. The English-medium school sector, which uses British and other international curricula and assesses students through the O-Level and A-Level examinations or the International Baccalaureate, has grown dramatically since the 1990s and now serves the children of the urban upper and upper-middle classes. The families who send their children to these schools are making a rational economic calculation: in an economy in which the most valuable jobs are in multinational companies, international development organizations, and global

financial institutions, English-medium education is a far better investment than Bengali-medium education in terms of immediate economic returns.

The result is a linguistic hierarchy that is simultaneously a class hierarchy. The children of the rich receive English-medium education. The children of the middle class receive Bengali-medium education in private schools or government schools with coaching supplements. The children of the poor receive Bengali-medium education in under-resourced government schools. And at the top of the hierarchy, the truly privileged send their children to boarding schools in India, the United Kingdom, or Singapore. This linguistic stratification compounds and reinforces the class stratification of the education system in ways that make the theoretical commitment to equal educational opportunity increasingly hollow.

The decolonization of language policy in education therefore requires not simply a reaffirmation of the value of Bengali but a serious engagement with the legitimate economic and social reasons why families across the income spectrum aspire to English-medium education. Simply insisting on Bengali-medium instruction will not address the underlying demand for English-language competence, and it will not level the educational playing field as long as wealthy families can circumvent any formal language policy through expensive private schooling. What is needed is a language education policy that combines a strong commitment to Bengali as the primary medium of instruction with a genuine and effective program of English-language teaching that gives all students, including those from the government school system, the English proficiency that economic participation in the contemporary world increasingly requires.

The BNP government's manifesto, as examined in the previous chapter, committed to a multilingual education approach that would make Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and French available as third languages in addition to Bengali and English, a recognition that the linguistic needs of Bangladesh in a globalized economy extend beyond the binary of Bengali and English. Whether this commitment can be translated into effective policy, given the severe shortage of qualified teachers in these languages, is an open question, but the aspiration represents a genuinely interesting departure from the previous language policy framework.

3.3 The Curriculum as a Site of Cultural and Political Contest

The curriculum of any national education system is not a neutral document. It is a political text: a statement about what knowledge matters, whose culture is to be transmitted, what values are to be instilled, and what version of the national story is to be authorized. In Bangladesh, the curriculum has been a site of intensely contested political and cultural struggle since independence, with different governments using curriculum revision to advance their particular ideological projects.

Under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the curriculum emphasized secular Bengali nationalism, the liberation war, and the principles of the new republic. Under the military governments of Ziaur Rahman and Ershad, Islam was progressively incorporated into the curriculum, and the explicitly secular orientation of the independence era was diluted. The successive revisions under Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina reflected the continuing oscillation between competing visions of Bangladeshi national identity, with each government using textbook revision as an instrument of

cultural and political agenda-setting. The 2021 curriculum framework, whatever its genuine pedagogical innovations, was also shaped by the Awami League's particular version of Bangladeshi nationalism, its emphasis on the liberation war, its contestation of the BNP's reading of history, and its secular-developmentalist vision of the educated Bangladeshi citizen.

The reversal of the 2021 curriculum after August 2024 and the commitment to a new curriculum in 2026 represents the latest iteration of this pattern. The interim government's decision to revert to the 2012 curriculum while a new one was prepared reflected both genuine pedagogical concerns about the implementation of the 2021 framework and a political reading of the 2021 curriculum as an instrument of Awami League ideological influence. The BNP government's 2026 curriculum agenda, which includes the restoration of subject streams at the secondary level and various changes to the textbook content, similarly reflects a particular political and cultural vision of what the educated Bangladeshi citizen should know and believe.

This pattern of curriculum-as-political-football is one of the most damaging features of Bangladesh's educational culture, because it means that the curriculum is never stable enough to be effectively implemented and never free enough from political calculation to be genuinely pedagogically coherent. Teachers, who must teach whatever the current government has decided the curriculum should be, have developed a rational response to this instability: a deep commitment to the examination requirements rather than the curriculum content, because the examinations, while also subject to political influence, change less frequently and more predictably than the curriculum itself.

Breaking this pattern requires what this commentary has consistently identified as one of the most important and most elusive goals of educational reform in Bangladesh: the depoliticization of the curriculum development process. This does not mean removing values from the curriculum. Every curriculum embeds values, and a curriculum without a value orientation is an impossibility. It means removing the partisan political calculation from the curriculum development process, creating space for genuine professional, philosophical, and public deliberation about what the curriculum should contain and why, and building into the institutional structure of curriculum governance enough independence from political direction that curriculum revisions are driven by genuine pedagogical need rather than the political agenda of whoever won the last election.

The creation of an independent National Curriculum Authority, governed by a board that includes educational experts, teachers, civil society representatives, and community voices but that is structurally insulated from direct political direction, is one institutional mechanism for achieving this goal. It is a mechanism that has been proposed in various forms in successive reform documents and that has never been implemented. The reasons it has not been implemented are primarily political: no government has been willing to surrender the powerful instrument of curriculum control, because control over what children learn is control over the cultural and political formation of the next generation. Achieving curriculum independence therefore requires the same kind of coalition for institutional reform, built across political lines on the basis of shared interest in educational quality, that depoliticizing university governance requires.

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Chapter Four: The Constitutional and Jurisprudential Foundations of Educational Rights

4.1 Education as a Constitutional Value

The constitutional and legal framework of education in Bangladesh deserves systematic examination in this synthesizing chapter, both because it is a dimension of the educational system that has received insufficient attention in comparative educational scholarship and because the legal and constitutional framework shapes in important ways what reforms are and are not possible within Bangladesh's institutional structure.

The Constitution of Bangladesh, adopted in 1972 and subsequently amended numerous times, establishes several provisions relevant to education. The most important are contained in the Fundamental Principles of State Policy in Part II of the Constitution, which establish the guiding principles that the state is obliged to follow in the exercise of its legislative and executive power. Article 17 of the Constitution, as originally adopted, established the obligation of the state to adopt effective measures for establishing a uniform, mass-oriented, and universal system of education, for extending free and compulsory education to all children to a level determined by law, for removing illiteracy, for relating education to the needs of society, and for producing properly trained and motivated citizens. Article 17 is in Part II, which means that it is not directly justiciable: no individual can go to court and enforce Article 17 against the state in the way that one can enforce the fundamental rights in Part III. But it establishes a constitutional norm against which the education policy of the state can be evaluated, and it provides a basis for constitutional litigation challenging education policies that are clearly inconsistent with the constitutional mandate.

The right to education was given a more directly enforceable legal basis by the Primary Education (Compulsory) Act 1990 and the subsequent Right to Education Act of 2010, which established the right to free and compulsory primary education as a statutory entitlement and created mechanisms for its enforcement. The 2010 Act represented a significant step in the constitutionalization of the right to education, bringing Bangladesh into line with the global trend toward the formal legal recognition of the right to education as an enforceable entitlement rather than merely a policy aspiration.

But the gap between the formal legal recognition of the right to education and the effective realization of that right in the lives of every Bangladeshi child remains enormous. The right to free and compulsory primary education is, in formal terms, established. In substantive terms, millions of Bangladeshi children experience an education that falls profoundly short of what the right to education, properly understood, requires. The jurisprudential question is how to bridge the gap between formal right and substantive realization.

4.2 The Jurisprudence of Educational Quality

The jurisprudence of education in Bangladesh has developed primarily around access rather than quality. The court cases and constitutional challenges that have reached the Supreme Court's

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High Court Division have primarily concerned questions of admission procedures, of the legality of particular examination arrangements, and of the employment rights of teachers in non-government institutions. The more fundamental question of whether the state's obligation to provide education includes an obligation to provide education of a minimum quality that actually enables students to exercise the substantive freedom that education is supposed to provide has received very limited judicial attention.

This is an important gap, because a right to education that encompasses only access, the right to attend a school, without encompassing quality, the right to actually learn something that expands one's genuine capabilities, is a thin and inadequate right. A child who attends school for eight years and leaves without functional literacy has formally exercised her right to education while being substantively denied its substance. The constitutional norm that the state should produce properly trained and motivated citizens cannot be satisfied merely by constructing school buildings and requiring attendance.

The development of a jurisprudence of educational quality in Bangladesh would draw on several sources. International human rights law, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and its elaboration by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, has developed the concept of the "4-A framework" for the right to education: education must be available, accessible, acceptable in quality, and adaptable. The acceptable quality dimension of this framework encompasses requirements that curriculum is educationally valid and culturally appropriate, that teaching methods are pedagogically sound, and that conditions of learning are conducive to the development of students' capacities. A Bangladeshi court that took the 4-A framework seriously as a guide to the constitutional obligations of the state under Article 17 would have a rich basis for scrutinizing the adequacy of the current system.

The fundamental argument that a rights-based approach to educational quality would support is this: a state that spends less than two percent of GDP on education in a system in which the most disadvantaged students routinely attend schools with inadequate buildings, unqualified teachers, and textbooks that are delivered late and often in insufficient quantities is not meeting its constitutional and international legal obligations to its children. The legal articulation of this argument, and its pursuit through constitutional litigation, would be a significant contribution to the reform of Bangladesh's education system, because it would give the aspiration of quality education for all the force of enforceable right rather than merely the weight of good policy.

4.3 The Legal Framework for Teacher Rights and Responsibilities

One of the most legally significant and practically consequential dimensions of Bangladesh's educational framework is the legal status of teachers, particularly teachers in non-government educational institutions. The vast majority of Bangladesh's secondary school teachers are employed in non-government institutions: schools that are not owned or directly managed by the government but that are regulated by the government and receive significant government subsidy through the Monthly Pay Order system. The legal and employment status of these teachers is anomalous: they are effectively public servants for most practical purposes, including pay scale and pension entitlements, but they lack the formal protections of civil service employment and

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are subject to a governance framework that leaves them vulnerable to the arbitrary decisions of school management committees that are often dominated by local political and economic elites.

The Monthly Pay Order system, through which the government pays the salaries of approved teachers in non-government institutions, is simultaneously one of the most important mechanisms for expanding the reach of government-regulated secondary education and one of the most significant sources of institutional vulnerability and corruption. The MPO approval process, by which a teacher's position in a non-government institution becomes eligible for government salary support, is notoriously susceptible to political influence and corruption. Positions are sometimes created and MPO approval obtained through political connections rather than genuine educational need. Teachers' service conditions, including their ability to challenge dismissal by school management committees, are inadequately protected by the current legal framework.

The reform of the legal framework for teacher employment in non-government institutions is therefore a significant educational justice issue as well as an educational quality issue. Teachers who are insecure in their employment, who are subject to the arbitrary authority of politically connected management committees, and who have limited legal recourse against unjust treatment cannot be expected to exercise the professional independence, the intellectual initiative, and the pedagogical creativity that educational reform requires. The development of a more robust legal framework for teacher employment, including clearer dismissal protection, stronger appeal mechanisms, and more transparent and merit-based MPO approval processes, is a prerequisite for the professionalization of teaching that underlies all other educational quality improvement.

4.4 Presidential and State Powers in Education

The intersection of presidential and political power with education policy in Bangladesh reflects a broader constitutional structure in which the executive has dominated both the legislative and the judicial branches with increasing thoroughness over the decades since independence. The relationship between the head of state, whether the President in the formal constitutional sense or the Prime Minister who has exercised the effective executive power, and the education system is mediated through several institutional channels.

The most direct channel is the appointment power. As this commentary has noted in examining higher education governance, the President of Bangladesh is formally the Chancellor of all public universities, a constitutional provision that gives the executive an important, if formally nominal, role in university governance. The practical significance of this provision depends on the political configuration at any given time: when the President and the Prime Minister represent the same political party or are politically aligned, the Chancellor role can be an instrument for the political direction of university governance. When they are from different political parties or have different orientations, the relationship between the President's formal role and the Prime Minister's effective power creates a site of potential institutional tension.

More broadly, the concentration of executive power in Bangladesh's parliamentary-presidential hybrid system means that the Prime Minister's office exercises enormous influence over

education policy, from budget allocation to curriculum design to the appointment of senior officials in education-related bureaucracies. The education ministries, of which Bangladesh has two for the different levels and types of education, are in practice under the political direction of the Prime Minister's office, and their policy decisions reflect the political priorities and the partisan considerations of the governing party rather than the professional judgment of educational experts.

This concentration of executive power over education is one of the key structural barriers to educational reform identified throughout this commentary. Breaking the grip of partisan politics on educational governance requires not merely the good intentions of individual political leaders but institutional mechanisms that create structural distance between the governing party's political interests and the management of the education system. These mechanisms, which would include an independent curriculum authority, an independent accreditation body, genuinely merit-based appointment processes for senior educational leadership, and a genuinely independent UGC, are well understood and have been repeatedly recommended. Creating them requires the political will to constrain the power of the executive in an area where that executive power has been most consistently exercised and most consistently abused.

Chapter Five: Pedagogy at the Crossroads - What Bangladesh's Classrooms Need

5.1 The Teacher at the Center

All of the philosophical analysis, all of the political economy, all of the constitutional jurisprudence, and all of the comparative policy recommendations in this commentary converge, ultimately, on a single figure: the teacher standing before her students in a classroom. Everything else, the curriculum frameworks, the examination systems, the legal provisions, the budget allocations, the governance structures, is context and support for what happens in that classroom. And what happens in that classroom depends overwhelmingly on the quality of the teacher: her knowledge of her subject, her pedagogical skill, her understanding of her students, her motivation, her professional confidence, and her sense of vocation.

This is not a romantic claim. It is supported by one of the most robust and consistent findings in the international literature on educational effectiveness: that the single most important within-school factor in student learning is the quality of the teacher. Students who have access to highly effective teachers learn dramatically more than students who have access to less effective teachers, and this effect is much larger than the effect of most other school-level variables, including class size within the normal range, the physical condition of the school building, and the presence or absence of textbooks. International research programs, including the large-scale PISA and TIMSS studies and the extensive literature on value-added models of teacher effectiveness, have confirmed this finding repeatedly and across diverse national contexts.

The implication for Bangladesh is direct and humbling. If the quality of teaching is the most important determinant of student learning, and if the quality of teaching in Bangladesh's government schools is, by virtually every available indicator, deeply inadequate, then improving

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the quality of teaching is the single most important priority for improving the quality of education in Bangladesh. Everything else, however important in its own right, is secondary.

5.2 The Crisis of Teacher Quality and Its Deep Roots

The crisis of teacher quality in Bangladesh has deep structural roots that cannot be addressed by any single intervention. Understanding these roots is essential for designing reforms that will actually work.

The first root is the crisis of teacher recruitment. Teaching in Bangladesh's government schools is not, in general, an occupation that attracts the most academically able graduates. The pay, while it has improved significantly over the past decade, remains low relative to other professions requiring similar levels of education. The working conditions, including large class sizes, inadequate physical facilities, heavy administrative burdens, and limited professional support, are unattractive. The social status of teaching, particularly at the primary level, has declined relative to other occupations. And the combination of these factors means that the most academically able graduates of Bangladesh's colleges and universities tend to pursue careers in other sectors, leaving teaching to those who could not find better alternatives.

This is not a critique of Bangladeshi teachers as individuals. Many teachers in Bangladesh's government schools are deeply committed, hard-working, and genuinely motivated by a sense of vocation. The problem is systemic: the system does not select for the qualities that make a great teacher, it does not train those qualities adequately in those who enter teaching, and it does not reward those qualities in ways that sustain and develop them over a career.

The second root is the inadequacy of pre-service teacher education. The institutional infrastructure for teacher education in Bangladesh is extensive: there are Primary Training Institutes for primary teachers, Teacher Training Colleges for secondary teachers, and the National Academy for Educational Management for educational administrators. But the quality of training provided by these institutions has been consistently criticized in evaluation studies and professional reviews. The curriculum of teacher training is too theoretical and insufficiently practical, disconnecting the pedagogical concepts taught in training from the classroom realities that teachers will encounter. The trainers themselves are often inadequately qualified and out of touch with contemporary developments in educational research and pedagogy. And the sheer number of teachers who need to be trained, given the size of Bangladesh's school system, overwhelms the capacity of the formal training infrastructure, meaning that many teachers enter classrooms with training that is either inadequate in depth or inadequate in duration.

The third root is the absence of an effective in-service professional development system. Teaching is a skill that develops with experience, but it develops most effectively when experience is combined with systematic reflection, feedback, and exposure to new ideas and practices. The most effective in-service professional development systems in the world, including those in Finland, Singapore, and South Korea, create structured time and institutional support for teachers to work together, to observe each other's practice, to reflect on what is working and what is not, and to engage with the emerging research literature on effective pedagogy. Bangladesh has no comparable system. In-service training is episodic rather than

continuous, often delivered through large group workshops that have limited impact on classroom practice, and largely disconnected from the evidence base on what professional development approaches are actually effective.

5.3 The Rote Learning Culture and Its Psychological Dimensions

The psychological dimensions of Bangladesh's rote-learning culture deserve sustained attention in any serious analysis of the country's educational problems. This culture is not simply a pedagogical habit that can be changed by revising the curriculum or training teachers in new methods. It is a deeply embedded pattern of cognitive and emotional engagement with knowledge that reflects the psychological realities of a particular social and educational environment.

The psychology of rote learning is the psychology of compliance. The student who succeeds through rote memorization has mastered the art of reproducing what authority demands. She has learned that the measure of intellectual success is the accurate reproduction of an externally specified content, not the generation of her own ideas or the critical engagement with what she has been taught. She has developed what the psychologist Martin Seligman would call "learned helplessness" in the domain of independent thought: the learned conviction that her own thinking is irrelevant, that what matters is alignment with the approved answer, and that deviation from the expected pattern is dangerous.

The educational psychologist Carol Dweck's concept of the "fixed mindset" is also relevant here. Students who are educated primarily through rote memorization and assessed primarily through examinations that test factual recall tend to develop a fixed mindset about their intellectual capacities: the belief that intelligence is a fixed quantity that they either possess or do not, rather than a capacity that develops through effort, challenge, and reflection. This mindset is deeply antithetical to the kind of intellectual risk-taking, creative problem-solving, and sustained engagement with difficult ideas that real learning requires.

The conversion of an educational culture from rote learning to genuine understanding-based learning is therefore not simply a matter of curriculum revision or assessment reform. It is a psychological transformation that must occur simultaneously in students, teachers, administrators, and parents, and it must be supported by changes in the institutional environment that make it psychologically safe to think independently, to give the wrong answer in the process of working toward the right one, to acknowledge uncertainty, and to ask questions that the teacher cannot immediately answer.

This psychological transformation is arguably the deepest and most difficult challenge of educational reform in Bangladesh. It is a challenge that requires sustained attention to the human dimensions of learning: to the emotional experience of students in classrooms, to the professional identity and self-confidence of teachers, to the relationships between schools and the families and communities they serve, and to the broader cultural values that shape how knowledge, intelligence, and achievement are understood. It is a challenge that curriculum reform and examination revision alone cannot address.

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5.4 Active Pedagogy, Social Learning, and the Bangladeshi Context

The international literature on effective pedagogy converges on a fairly clear set of principles, even as it acknowledges the complexity of their application in diverse contexts. Students learn more deeply when they are actively engaged with material rather than passively receiving it, when they have opportunities to apply what they are learning to real problems rather than simply rehearsing it, when they receive timely and specific feedback on their developing understanding, when they collaborate with peers in ways that require them to articulate and defend their thinking, and when the material they are engaging with is connected to their own experience and concerns in ways that make it meaningful.

These principles are not culturally specific. They reflect what is known about how human beings learn, and they apply in Bangladeshi classrooms as much as in Finnish or South Korean ones. But their application in the Bangladeshi context requires careful attention to the specific conditions of that context. Class sizes in many government schools are very large, making active and individualized pedagogy much more challenging than in smaller classes. Physical classroom conditions, including lighting, ventilation, and the availability of space for group activities, are often inadequate for the kinds of active learning approaches that effective pedagogy recommends. And the examination system exerts constant pressure toward a narrower and more test-focused approach to teaching that is incompatible with the broader and more exploratory learning experiences that deep understanding requires.

The response to these contextual challenges should not be to abandon the aspiration for active and effective pedagogy but to develop contextually appropriate forms of active pedagogy that can work within real Bangladeshi classroom conditions. There is a substantial and growing body of research on effective pedagogy in large-class, low-resource contexts, drawing on experience in countries including India, Kenya, Uganda, and Brazil, that offers relevant lessons for Bangladesh. The work of organizations including Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), developed by the Indian NGO Pratham and now implemented in multiple African countries as well, demonstrates that structured approaches to diagnostic assessment and targeted instruction can dramatically improve learning outcomes even in very large classes with limited resources. Adapting and scaling such approaches in the Bangladeshi context is a more promising short-term strategy for improving learning outcomes than waiting for the class size reductions and resource improvements that would make more resource-intensive pedagogical approaches feasible.

Chapter Six: Comparative Perspectives - What Bangladesh Can Learn and What It Can Teach

6.1 The Limits and Value of Educational Comparison

Comparative education is both one of the most valuable and one of the most dangerous tools in the educational reformer's toolkit. Its value lies in the evidence it provides about what is possible: that educational systems can achieve dramatically better outcomes than Bangladesh's current system achieves, that teacher quality can be substantially improved through systematic

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investment in recruitment and professional development, that curriculum reform can successfully shift pedagogy toward deeper understanding, and that governance reform can protect educational institutions from political capture. Its danger lies in the temptation to assume that what has worked elsewhere can simply be transplanted to a different context without the careful adaptation that contextual differences require.

The history of educational reform in Bangladesh contains several cautionary examples of ill-adapted transplantation. The competency-based curriculum frameworks imported from OECD contexts without adequate attention to the enormous differences in teacher quality, resource availability, and examination culture between Bangladesh and the countries where those frameworks were developed. The performance-based school management approaches borrowed from the New Public Management tradition of the United Kingdom and Australia and applied in a governance context where the preconditions for effective performance management, including reliable data systems, organizational capacity, and institutional accountability, were absent. And the various iterations of student-centered pedagogy promoted by international development organizations that failed to take seriously the psychological and institutional barriers to changing the teacher-student relationship in a context shaped by decades of authoritarian pedagogy.

Genuine comparative learning requires more than identifying successful practices elsewhere and recommending their adoption in Bangladesh. It requires understanding why those practices work in their original context, what preconditions they require, and what adaptations would be needed to make them work in the Bangladeshi context. With this understanding in mind, this chapter examines several national educational experiences that offer genuinely relevant lessons for Bangladesh.

6.2 The Finnish Model: Teacher Quality as the Foundation

Finland is the country most frequently cited in international educational discourse as a model of educational success, and for good reason. Finland's PISA results have consistently placed its students among the highest performers in the world in reading, mathematics, and science, and this performance is achieved with very low levels of student stress, very limited use of homework and private tutoring, and a strong commitment to equity across socioeconomic groups. Understanding what drives Finland's educational success is therefore directly relevant to educational reform in Bangladesh.

The core of Finland's educational success is teacher quality, understood in a comprehensive sense that goes well beyond what teacher quality usually means in development discourse. In Finland, teaching at every level is a highly selective and prestigious profession. Entry into teacher education programs is competitive, with the best teaching programs accepting fewer than ten percent of applicants, drawing from among the academically strongest graduates. Teacher education is a rigorous, research-based master's degree program that combines deep subject knowledge with pedagogical theory and extensive supervised practical experience. Teachers are paid comparably to other professions requiring similar levels of education. They exercise substantial professional autonomy in how they teach the curriculum, trusting the school system's investment in their professional judgment. And they are supported throughout their careers by robust systems of professional development and collegial collaboration.

None of this is directly transferable to Bangladesh, where teacher education programs are underfunded and of low quality, teacher pay is low, and professional autonomy is constrained by the examination system and the administrative culture. But the Finnish example is relevant in one crucial respect: it demonstrates that investing systematically and substantially in teacher quality, in the rigorous selection, deep professional preparation, and sustained professional development of teachers, is the most reliable foundation for a high-quality educational system. The specific mechanisms through which this investment is made will differ in different contexts. Finland's competitive teacher education system works in a context where teaching is a highly valued profession and where the investment in teacher education is supported by a broader social consensus about the importance of education. Creating similar conditions in Bangladesh would require a sustained, multi-decade effort to raise the social status and economic rewards of teaching, to reform teacher education institutions, and to build the professional culture of teaching as an intellectual vocation rather than a bureaucratic job.

6.3 South Korea: The Double-Edged Sword of Educational Achievement

South Korea's educational record presents a fascinating and cautionary counterpoint to the Finnish model. South Korea has consistently ranked among the highest-performing countries in PISA assessments, and its extraordinary expansion of educational attainment from the mid-twentieth century, when the majority of the population was illiterate, to the present, when it has one of the highest rates of tertiary educational attainment in the world, is one of the most remarkable developmental achievements in history.

But South Korea's educational achievement has been purchased at an enormous human cost. The South Korean educational system is one of the most intensely competitive and examination-focused in the world. The Suneung, the university entrance examination, exerts a pressure on South Korean students that is renowned internationally for its psychological intensity. The private tutoring industry, known in Korean as "hagwon," is one of the largest in the world, consuming a significant portion of family income across the economic spectrum. South Korean students rank among the least happy and most stressed in PISA surveys of student well-being, despite their high academic achievement. And the intense examination culture has been associated with high rates of youth anxiety, depression, and even suicide.

South Korea's experience is relevant to Bangladesh both positively and negatively. Positively, it demonstrates that a low-income, postcolonial society can achieve dramatically improved educational outcomes in a relatively short historical time frame through sustained investment and political commitment to education. Negatively, it is a warning against the path of examination intensification as the primary lever of educational improvement, because this path, while it can produce measurable gains in academic performance on standardized tests, does so at the cost of student well-being, creative development, and the kind of intrinsic motivation for learning that sustains lifelong educational engagement.

Bangladesh's current educational culture already shares many of the dysfunctional features of the South Korean model: intense examination pressure, a thriving private tutoring industry, high student stress, and a tendency to value examination performance over genuine learning. The lesson from South Korea for Bangladesh is not to intensify these features but to find a way to

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achieve the educational ambition that drove South Korea's success while avoiding the psychological and human costs that accompanied it. This requires the kind of systemic redesign of the examination system and the learning culture that is conceptually clear but institutionally very difficult, given the political economy of the examination system described in the previous chapter.

6.4 India: The Challenge of Scale and the Lessons of BRAC

Bangladesh's neighbor India offers educational lessons that are more directly contextually relevant than those of Finland or South Korea, because India shares with Bangladesh the challenges of educating at scale in conditions of poverty, of managing the relationship between state education and diverse religious and cultural communities, and of navigating the political economy of educational reform in a democratic but highly unequal society.

India's experience with educational reform, including the landmark Right to Education Act of 2009 (RTE) and the subsequent National Education Policy of 2020, offers both positive and cautionary lessons. The RTE established a justiciable right to free and compulsory education for all children between six and fourteen, and has driven significant improvements in school enrollment and in the physical conditions of government schools through its mandated norms for school infrastructure. But its implementation has been uneven, and its impact on learning outcomes has been disappointing: the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), which tracks learning outcomes in rural India, has consistently documented very low levels of basic literacy and numeracy among students who are formally enrolled in school, a finding that has driven the "learning crisis" discourse in global education policy.

India's experience confirms the lesson that enrollment without learning is an inadequate measure of educational progress, and that improving learning outcomes requires much more than ensuring children attend school. The "foundational learning" approach promoted in India's National Education Policy 2020 and implemented through NIPUN Bharat, which focuses intensely on ensuring that all students achieve basic literacy and numeracy by Grade 3, is an example of a reform approach that prioritizes learning outcomes over enrollment and credential production. This approach, drawing on evidence about the critical importance of foundational literacy and numeracy for subsequent learning, is directly relevant to Bangladesh, where data from the Annual Primary School Census and other sources suggest that significant proportions of students complete primary school without achieving functional literacy.

The experience of BRAC, Bangladesh's homegrown development organization, is also a crucial source of comparative insight. BRAC's non-formal primary education program, established in the early 1980s and at its peak enrolling more than one million students, demonstrated that genuinely child-centered, activity-based, community-embedded education was achievable at scale in the conditions of rural Bangladesh. The BRAC school model, with smaller classes, female teachers drawn from the local community, flexible scheduling to accommodate the agricultural and domestic responsibilities of students and their families, and an activity-based curriculum that engaged children in learning through doing rather than listening and memorizing, achieved better learning outcomes at lower cost than the formal government primary school system. BRAC's experience offers a genuinely indigenous proof of concept for the kind of

pedagogical transformation that the formal school system needs, and it deserves much more serious attention in the design of formal sector reform than it has typically received.

6.5 Sri Lanka: Lessons in Language Policy and Educational Equity

Sri Lanka offers another set of comparatively relevant lessons, particularly in the domains of language policy and educational equity. Sri Lanka achieved universal primary education and very high rates of literacy well ahead of Bangladesh and at lower income levels, through a sustained public investment in education from the mid-twentieth century that placed free schooling and free textbooks at the center of the country's development strategy.

Sri Lanka's experience with language policy in education is particularly instructive, if also cautionary. The replacement of English as the medium of instruction with Sinhala and Tamil in the 1950s, driven by Sinhala nationalist politics, was intended to democratize access to education by removing the linguistic barrier that English-medium instruction created for the majority of the population. In some respects it achieved this democratizing goal: it opened up secondary and higher education to students from non-elite backgrounds who could not master English-medium instruction. But it also contributed to the marginalization of the Tamil-speaking minority by creating a education system in which Sinhala was the dominant language and Tamil-medium education was progressively disadvantaged, a dynamic that contributed to the ethnic tensions that eventually erupted in the civil war. Sri Lanka's experience is therefore a warning that language policy in education is never purely a technical matter of pedagogy and access but always also a matter of ethnic politics and justice, a lesson with direct relevance to Bangladesh's treatment of its linguistic minorities.

Chapter Seven: The Digital Revolution, Artificial Intelligence, and Education in Bangladesh

7.1 Technology and the Transformation of Education

The digital revolution has transformed virtually every domain of human activity, and education is no exception. The emergence of personal computing, the internet, the smartphone, online learning platforms, and most recently the rapid development of artificial intelligence has created both new opportunities and new challenges for educational systems around the world, including Bangladesh's.

This commentary has engaged with the technological dimensions of education at several points in preceding parts, particularly in examining the Digital Bangladesh vision of the Awami League government and its educational implications and in examining the role of technology in higher education quality improvement. This chapter brings together these threads and situates them within the rapidly evolving landscape of educational technology as it exists in 2026.

The most significant technological development of the past several years for education is undoubtedly the emergence of large language models and the AI systems built on them,

including Claude, GPT-4, and their successors. These systems can engage in sophisticated natural language conversation, can answer complex questions across virtually every domain of knowledge, can produce written text of high quality on demand, can analyze and summarize large bodies of information, can provide personalized explanations tailored to different levels of understanding, and can give immediate feedback on written work. Their educational implications are profound and are still being worked out by educators, policy-makers, and educational researchers around the world.

The most immediate challenge that AI poses for educational systems built around conventional examinations is the challenge of assessment integrity. If an AI system can produce a high-quality essay on any topic in seconds, and if students have access to these systems on their smartphones, then the value of assessing students through take-home essays of the kind that many universities use is sharply diminished. This challenge has prompted a significant international debate about the future of assessment in the age of AI, and educational systems from the United Kingdom to the United States to Australia are grappling with how to redesign assessment approaches that remain meaningful and rigorous in a world where AI can do much of what conventional assessments ask of students.

For Bangladesh, this challenge has both a specific dimension and a broader one. The specific dimension is that the relatively simple assessment formats used in Bangladesh's examination system, which emphasize factual recall and the reproduction of model answers, are particularly vulnerable to AI assistance. A student with access to an AI system can answer most of the questions on a typical SSC or HSC paper without any real understanding of the subject matter, simply by querying the AI system. This vulnerability is not yet a major practical issue in Bangladesh because AI access is unevenly distributed and because the examination system is conducted in controlled conditions that limit digital access. But as smartphone penetration continues to increase and as AI systems become more integrated into everyday digital life, this vulnerability will become more significant.

The broader challenge is the question of what education is for when AI can do most of what conventional education trains students to do. If an AI system can translate between languages, can write competent legal documents, can explain medical symptoms and suggest diagnoses, can analyze financial data, and can produce professional-quality writing on demand, then the economic value of the credentials that education has historically provided is genuinely in question. This does not mean that education becomes less important. It means that the kind of education that remains valuable in the age of AI is different from the kind that has dominated the educational conversation so far. The education that remains valuable is the education that cultivates the distinctively human capacities that AI systems cannot replicate: deep conceptual understanding that can be applied to genuinely novel problems, creative synthesis that combines knowledge from different domains in original ways, ethical judgment that navigates the complex moral dimensions of real-world decisions, empathetic engagement with other human beings in relationships of teaching, care, and governance, and the metacognitive capacity to understand one's own learning and to direct it effectively.

These are, strikingly, exactly the capacities that the best educational philosophy from Dewey to Freire to Tagore has always argued are the most important outcomes of education. The irony is

that it took the emergence of artificial intelligence to demonstrate with unmistakable clarity that these capacities are not merely philosophically desirable but economically essential. The argument for a genuinely liberal, deeply humanistic, competency-based education, which educational philosophers have been making for generations against the pressures of an increasingly vocational and examination-focused educational culture, has suddenly received the most powerful possible empirical confirmation: in a world with AI, the education that develops what is distinctively human is the education that makes people most economically valuable, as well as most fully human.

7.2 Bangladesh's Digital Education Infrastructure and Its Limitations

Bangladesh has made significant investments in digital education infrastructure over the past decade and a half, driven initially by the Digital Bangladesh vision of the Awami League government and continued, with somewhat different emphasis, by subsequent governments. The establishment of multimedia classrooms in secondary schools, the development of the Sheikh Russell Digital Lab network, the BdREN research and education network connecting universities, the digital content available through the Teachers' Portal, and the various e-learning platforms developed by the Ministry of Education represent a substantial, if unevenly effective, investment in digital educational infrastructure.

The limitations of this digital infrastructure are significant and well-documented. Device distribution has been uneven, with schools in urban and peri-urban areas significantly better equipped than those in remote rural areas. Connectivity has been a persistent problem: the provision of internet access to schools, particularly at the secondary level, has been far slower than the provision of devices, meaning that many of the devices distributed to schools are used primarily as offline presentation tools rather than as gateways to the connected digital learning ecosystem that they could potentially enable. Teacher capacity to use digital tools effectively is very limited: the training provided to teachers in the use of multimedia classroom equipment and digital content has been insufficient in both depth and duration to enable effective pedagogical integration of technology.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these limitations with particular sharpness. When Bangladesh's schools closed in March 2020 and remained closed for eighteen months, one of the longest school closure periods in the world, the attempt to continue education through digital means revealed the profound digital divide within the school system. Students from urban, higher-income families with access to smartphones, tablets, and reliable internet connections were able to participate in online learning to a significant degree. Students from rural, lower-income families with limited or no digital access effectively dropped out of educational engagement for the duration of the closure, experiencing learning losses whose magnitude is still being assessed but whose educational and social consequences are severe.

The lesson of the COVID-19 period is not that digital technology is irrelevant to education in Bangladesh, but that the benefits of digital technology in education are highly unequally distributed and that without deliberate and sustained effort to address the digital divide, the digital transformation of education will amplify rather than reduce the educational inequalities that already exist. The challenge for Bangladesh's educational technology policy is to find ways

to use digital technology as a genuine equalizer, expanding the educational opportunities available to the most disadvantaged students rather than primarily enhancing the already considerable advantages of the most privileged ones.

7.3 The BNP Government's Digital Education Agenda

The BNP government that took office in 2026 has committed, through its election manifesto and its twelve-point education reform agenda, to a range of digital education initiatives that represent a continuation and in some respects an intensification of the previous government's digital education program. The commitment to free Wi-Fi access in all secondary schools, the One Teacher One Tab initiative through which every secondary school teacher would receive a tablet device with educational software, the mandatory integration of digital literacy, artificial intelligence awareness, and cyber safety into the school curriculum, and the development of digital content for school subjects are among the specific commitments outlined in the government's education agenda.

These are generally positive commitments, and if implemented effectively, they could make a significant contribution to improving the quality and the equity of digital education in Bangladesh. Several critical concerns, however, need to be flagged.

The first is the connectivity challenge. Providing every teacher with a tablet is of limited educational value if the school does not have reliable internet connectivity. The history of digital education initiatives in Bangladesh is littered with examples of devices distributed without the connectivity and the support infrastructure necessary to use them effectively. The government's commitment to free Wi-Fi in schools needs to be accompanied by a realistic and adequately funded plan for achieving universal school connectivity, including the difficult problem of last-mile connectivity in remote rural and island communities.

The second is the teacher capacity challenge. The educational research literature is clear that the mere provision of technology to teachers does not improve learning outcomes: it is the pedagogically effective use of technology that matters, and achieving pedagogically effective use requires sustained and high-quality professional development. The BNP government's commitment to teachers' tablets being equipped with lesson plan templates and question banks is a useful step, but it will only translate into improved teaching if teachers receive the pedagogical support they need to use these tools effectively in their classrooms.

The third is the content quality challenge. The value of digital content for education depends entirely on its quality: on whether the content is accurate, engaging, pedagogically sound, and genuinely connected to the curriculum in ways that teachers and students find useful. Bangladesh has a significant gap in the development of high-quality Bengali-language digital educational content across the subject areas and grade levels of the school curriculum. Addressing this gap requires substantial investment in content development, drawing on the best educational expertise available in Bangladesh and internationally.

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Chapter Eight: The Governance Reform Imperative - Administration, Law, and Political Will

8.1 Governance as the Meta-Problem

Throughout this commentary, governance has emerged as the meta-problem of Bangladesh's education system: the problem within which all the other problems are nested, and from which all the other problems in significant part flow. The governance of Bangladesh's education system is inadequate not because the people who govern it are uniformly corrupt or incompetent, though corruption and incompetence are real and serious problems. It is inadequate because the institutional structures within which educational governance is conducted create incentives for the wrong things: for political loyalty over professional judgment, for enrollment over learning, for credential production over capability development, for short-term electoral calculation over long-term institutional investment.

Institutional economists from Douglass North onward have argued persuasively that the quality of institutions, understood as the formal and informal rules that govern human interaction, is the most important determinant of long-term development outcomes. Countries with strong, rule-governed institutions that reward productive behavior and punish corruption tend to develop effectively. Countries with weak institutions that reward rent-seeking and punish productive behavior tend to stagnate. Bangladesh's educational institutions, in this analysis, are a relatively extreme example of the latter type: they are structured in ways that consistently reward political loyalty and punish independent professional judgment.

The reform of educational governance in Bangladesh therefore requires institutional reform in the deep sense: not merely changing the rules on paper but changing the incentive structures that determine how actors actually behave. This is a much harder task than changing the curriculum or building new classrooms. It requires sustained political commitment over many years, the kind of commitment that is very difficult to maintain in a political culture shaped by electoral cycles of short duration and by the patronage logics of competitive party politics.

8.2 The Education Commission Question

One of the most prominent debates in Bangladesh's educational reform discourse since August 2024 has been the question of whether a dedicated education reform commission should be established. The interim government of 2024 and 2025, despite forming eleven reform commissions on various aspects of governance and public policy, conspicuously did not form a commission dedicated to education reform. This omission was widely criticized by educational experts and civil society organizations as a signal that education was not being treated with the urgency that its problems demand.

The BNP government's manifesto committed to the formation of an education reform commission, and the government's twelve-point agenda includes a reference to overall quality improvement through a commission mechanism. Whether and when such a commission will be formed, how its membership will be determined, and what its mandate will be are among the most consequential near-term questions in Bangladesh's educational reform landscape.

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The value of a well-constituted education commission lies in its capacity to create a space for the kind of comprehensive, evidence-based, publicly consultative deliberation about educational priorities that is very difficult to conduct through the normal channels of governmental policy-making. A commission that brings together distinguished educational experts, practitioners, civil society representatives, and community voices in a process that is transparent, evidence-based, and shielded from immediate partisan political pressure can produce recommendations that command broad credibility and that provide a basis for sustained reform over a period that transcends electoral cycles.

But the history of education commissions in Bangladesh and elsewhere is not uniformly encouraging. Commissions that are constituted primarily to provide political cover for decisions already made, that are given mandates too narrow to address the fundamental problems of the system, that are not given adequate time and resources to do thorough work, or whose recommendations are not taken seriously by the government that commissioned them are worse than useless, because they consume the energies of educational experts and build public expectations that are then disappointed. The design of an education commission, if one is established, deserves as much careful attention as its mandate and its membership: what process will it use, how will it engage the public, how will it handle disagreements among its members, and what mechanisms will exist to ensure that its recommendations are actually implemented?

8.3 Administrative Reform: The Education Bureaucracy

The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, the Directorate of Primary Education, the University Grants Commission, the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board, the Bangladesh Technical Education Board, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, and the various other bodies that constitute Bangladesh's educational administration together employ a very large number of people and manage a very large budget. The quality of this administration is a critical determinant of the quality of the educational system: it is the bureaucratic machinery that translates policy decisions into classroom realities, and the gap between policy and practice in Bangladesh's education system is in large part a gap of administrative quality.

The administrative reform of Bangladesh's education bureaucracy involves several dimensions that are worth separately identifying. The first is the quality of personnel: the recruitment, training, and career management of the civil servants and educational administrators who staff the education bureaucracy. The cadre system of Bangladesh's civil service, in which generalist civil servants rotate between different ministries and departments throughout their careers, has been criticized for producing administrators who lack the specialized knowledge and the sustained institutional commitment that effective educational administration requires. The development of a cadre of genuinely specialist educational administrators, with professional training in educational policy, management, and evaluation, who make careers within the educational administration rather than rotating through it, would be a significant improvement.

The second is the information systems that support administrative decision-making. Effective educational administration requires good data: reliable information about enrollment, attendance, learning outcomes, teacher qualifications, school infrastructure, budget utilization, and a range of

other variables. Bangladesh has made significant progress in developing educational information systems, including the BANBEIS (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics) and various school-level management information systems, but the quality, completeness, and analytical utility of the data collected remains limited, and the use of data in administrative decision-making is insufficiently systematic.

The third is the accountability mechanisms that hold the education bureaucracy responsible for its performance. The culture of accountability in Bangladesh's public administration more broadly is weak: officials who perform poorly face limited consequences, while officials who perform well receive limited rewards. Creating stronger accountability mechanisms for educational administrators, including performance management systems that track outcomes rather than just processes, independent inspection and evaluation bodies that can identify and report on administrative failures, and stronger consequences for corruption and gross mismanagement, would create incentives for better administrative performance.

8.4 Decentralization and Local Governance

The question of how much educational decision-making should be decentralized to local governments and communities is one of the most contested and most context-specific questions in educational administration globally. The case for decentralization rests on the argument that local authorities are better placed than central government to understand and respond to the specific needs of their communities, that local accountability mechanisms are more effective than remote central control, and that community ownership of schools increases community investment in their success. The case against decentralization rests on the argument that local governments may have weaker administrative capacity than central government, that decentralization may increase inequality if wealthy communities are better able to supplement central government provision than poor ones, and that the political economy of local government may be no less susceptible to patronage and corruption than that of central government, and may be more so.

Bangladesh has experimented with various forms of decentralization in education, including School Managing Committees at the secondary level and Parent-Teacher Associations at the primary level. The record of these experiments is mixed. School Managing Committees have in many cases been captured by local political elites rather than representing genuine community voice, and their role in improving school quality has been limited. The political economy of local educational governance in Bangladesh, in which local political actors compete for control of educational institutions as patronage resources, replicates at the local level the same problem of political capture that afflicts national-level educational governance.

This does not mean that decentralization is wrong for Bangladesh. It means that effective educational decentralization requires the same prerequisites that effective central governance requires: strong accountability mechanisms, professional administrative capacity, transparent information systems, and genuine community participation that goes beyond the nominal representation of powerful local actors on formal committees. Building these prerequisites at the local level is a longer-term institutional development task that cannot be shortcut by simply

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transferring formal authority to local bodies that lack the capacity and the accountability systems to use it effectively.

Chapter Nine: Presidential and Political Analysis - The Education-Power Nexus

9.1 Education and the State: A Theoretical Framework

The relationship between education and political power is one of the foundational themes of political philosophy, and understanding it is essential for any serious analysis of educational reform in Bangladesh. From the time of Plato's Republic, political philosophers have recognized that the education of the young is the primary mechanism through which political regimes reproduce themselves across generations. The educational system of any society is not neutral: it reflects the political values, the social hierarchies, and the power relationships of the society in which it is embedded, and it either reinforces those values and relationships or challenges them.

The relationship between education and political power operates through several channels that are visible in Bangladesh's history. The curriculum channel: through the content of what is taught, the political regime shapes the intellectual formation of the young, including their understanding of history, their sense of national identity, their political values, and their sense of what is natural, inevitable, or challengeable about the social order they inhabit. The language channel: through the choice of the medium of instruction and the languages that are taught, the political regime shapes the cultural formation of the young and the distribution of educational advantage across linguistic communities. The selection channel: through the examination and credential systems, the political regime determines who has access to the educational opportunities that confer economic and social advantage, and therefore shapes the reproduction of the social hierarchy across generations. And the institution channel: through the governance of educational institutions, the political regime either protects or captures the institutional independence that allows education to serve as a genuine force for critical inquiry and democratic citizenship rather than as an instrument of regime perpetuation.

Bangladesh's history illustrates all four channels with considerable vividness. Each successive government has used the curriculum channel to advance its particular version of national identity and political values. The language channel has been used both in the original language movement and in the subsequent politics of English-medium education as a class privilege. The examination and credential systems have been used as instruments of social control, creating a pathway to social mobility that appears meritocratic but that systematically advantages those with the social capital and the economic resources to navigate its requirements. And the institution channel has been used, repeatedly and comprehensively, to capture universities and other educational institutions as instruments of partisan political control.

9.2 The July 2024 Uprising as Educational Critique

The student uprising of July and August 2024 was, among other things, a profound critique of the relationship between education and political power in Bangladesh. The immediate trigger of

the uprising, the quota system for government jobs, was an educational issue in the specific sense that government job quotas determine the return on investment in education: if certain categories of graduates receive preferential access to government employment regardless of their academic merit, the incentive to invest in quality education is distorted, and the meritocratic premise of the educational system is undermined.

But the uprising went much deeper than the quota issue. The students who led and sustained the movement were expressing a broader and more fundamental frustration with an educational and social system that had simultaneously demanded enormous sacrifices from them, in terms of examination preparation, coaching expenses, and social pressure, while failing to deliver the economic and social outcomes that those sacrifices were supposed to earn. They were graduates of universities that had given them credentials without the knowledge and skills that those credentials were supposed to certify. They were the products of an educational system that had asked them to memorize and reproduce without developing their capacity to think and create. And they were the inheritors of a political system that had used the educational institutions they attended as instruments of its own perpetuation rather than as spaces for the free inquiry and democratic deliberation that genuine education requires.

The uprising therefore represents, in a profound sense, an educational movement: a movement for a different kind of education, one that actually delivers on the promise that the formal system has made to successive generations of Bangladeshi youth. The demands of the movement, for a just state, for meritocratic opportunity, for freedom from the violence and intimidation that the student wings of the governing party had used to control university campuses, were demands for the educational conditions that genuine learning requires: safety, fairness, freedom of inquiry, and an honest relationship between merit and reward.

9.3 The BNP Government and the Politics of Educational Reform

The BNP government that emerged from the February 2026 elections inherits an educational legacy that is complex in its political dimensions. The party's relationship to education is shaped by several historical and ideological factors that are worth briefly examining.

The BNP's educational ideology has historically been shaped by three tendencies. The first is a conservative nationalism that places Bengali cultural identity at the center of educational purpose while maintaining a different position on certain aspects of secularism from the Awami League. The second is a broadly pro-market orientation that is sympathetic to private educational provision and that looks favorably on market mechanisms in educational governance. The third is a traditional Islamic sensibility that has led the BNP to be more accommodating of religious education, including the Qawmi Madrasa sector, than the Awami League's more assertively secularist positions.

The BNP's manifesto commitments on education are generally ambitious and in many respects progressive: the commitment to raising educational spending to five percent of GDP, the commitment to free education for women through to the postgraduate level, the commitment to digital education infrastructure, the commitment to teacher quality improvement, and the commitment to an education reform commission all represent genuine improvements over the

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previous status quo, if implemented effectively. The critical question is whether the institutional culture and the political economy of the BNP government will allow these commitments to be implemented in ways that genuinely serve the educational interests of all Bangladeshi children rather than the partisan interests of the party and its allied constituencies.

The evidence from the appointment of vice-chancellors and other senior educational officials in the immediate post-transition period is, as previously noted, not encouraging. The pattern of partisan appointment that the BNP condemned in its predecessor appears to have been replicated in a different partisan key. Whether this represents the inevitable logic of a system that needs institutional redesign to function differently, or whether it represents a failure of political will that stronger leadership could overcome, is a question that the coming years will answer.

The historical record does suggest that no Bangladeshi government has yet found a way to consistently subordinate its partisan interests in educational institutions to the educational interests of the students and society those institutions are supposed to serve. This record does not make genuine reform impossible, but it does make it imperative that the design of educational reform in Bangladesh includes institutional safeguards against political capture that do not depend on the sustained good intentions of any particular political actor.

9.4 Civil Society, International Partners, and the Politics of Reform

The politics of educational reform in Bangladesh cannot be understood solely by reference to the governing party and its opposition. Civil society organizations, international development partners, the media, academic communities, and the organized interests of teachers, parents, and students all play important roles in shaping the educational reform landscape.

Civil society organizations, particularly CAMPE, BRAC, and the various advocacy organizations that work on educational quality and equity, have been consistently important voices for educational reform in Bangladesh. CAMPE's work in monitoring and evaluating Bangladesh's educational progress, producing evidence-based analysis of the educational system's performance, and mobilizing civil society voices around educational reform priorities has been a significant countervailing force against the tendency of governments to use education policy primarily for partisan advantage. The Campaign for Popular Education's role in the consultations around the BNP's election manifesto, as noted in recent media analysis, represents the kind of civil society engagement in educational policy-making that is an essential complement to governmental action.

International development partners, including the Global Partnership for Education, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, and bilateral development agencies, have been important sources of both funding and intellectual influence in Bangladesh's educational development. The Partnership Compact between Bangladesh and the Global Partnership for Education, which aligns international support with national reform priorities in teacher professional development and curriculum implementation, is a recent example of this engagement. The influence of international partners in Bangladesh's education is not always positive: the tendency of international organizations to promote their own reform frameworks and approaches, which may be better suited to other contexts, has been a persistent concern. But

at their best, international partners bring genuine expertise, evidence from international experience, and a degree of insulation from domestic political pressures that can support more analytically rigorous and long-term thinking about educational reform than is always possible within the domestic political cycle.

The media, including Bangladesh's vibrant and diverse print and digital media landscape, plays an important role in shaping public discourse about education. Investigative journalism on educational corruption, including question paper leaks, examination fraud, and ghost teachers, has been an important source of accountability pressure on the system. Analysis and commentary on educational policy by journalists, academics, and civil society leaders in publications including The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, The Business Standard, and others contributes to a public conversation about education that is, despite the political pressures under which it operates, often analytically sophisticated and genuinely critical.

Chapter Ten: Toward a Philosophy of Educational Renewal in Bangladesh

10.1 The Fundamental Choice

At the deepest level, the reform of Bangladesh's education system requires a fundamental choice about what kind of society Bangladesh wants to become. This may appear to be a political rather than an educational question, but it is in fact both: the kind of educational system a society creates reflects the kind of society it already is and expresses its aspirations for the kind of society it wants to become.

Bangladesh in 2026 stands at a genuine historical juncture. The fall of the Awami League government in August 2024 was not merely a change in government. It was a generational reckoning: a demonstration by the youngest generation of Bangladeshis that they refused to accept the political settlement that their parents and grandparents had lived within, and that they demanded something better from the institutions of the state, including its educational institutions. The student uprising was a claim not just on political power but on the future: a demand that the next fifty years of Bangladesh's history be different from the first fifty in its relationship to democracy, to justice, to institutional integrity, and to the genuine cultivation of human potential.

The educational reform of the next decade is the most important institutional expression of how Bangladesh responds to that demand. If the educational system of 2036 looks essentially like the educational system of 2016, with the same rote-learning culture, the same examination fetishism, the same political capture of universities, the same chronic underinvestment, and the same vast inequalities between the educational experiences of the rich and the poor, then the promise of the 2024 uprising will have been betrayed. If it looks genuinely different, not perfect, but genuinely better in ways that matter for the lives of Bangladeshi children and for the health of Bangladeshi democracy, then the uprising will have achieved something lasting.

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10.2 The Minimum Threshold of Justice

This commentary has argued throughout that justice must be at the center of educational reform in Bangladesh. In this concluding chapter, it is worth being more precise about what justice requires.

Justice in education requires, at a minimum, that every child in Bangladesh, regardless of the economic circumstances of her family, the geographical location of her school, the language of her community, the religion of her household, or the gender identity she was born with, has access to an education of sufficient quality to enable her to develop the intellectual, social, and practical capacities she needs to live a full, autonomous, and dignified human life. This is a demanding standard, and Bangladesh is very far from meeting it. But it is the standard that a society committed to human dignity and democratic equality is obligated to aspire to, and it should be the benchmark against which every educational reform proposal is evaluated.

Justice in education further requires that the formal commitments of equality of educational opportunity be backed by substantive policies that actually equalize access to quality education across the dimensions of inequality that currently determine educational outcomes in Bangladesh: class, gender, geographical location, linguistic community, and religious affiliation. Formal equality, the nominal provision of the same curriculum and the same examination system to all students, is compatible with, and in fact produces, profound substantive inequality when the material conditions within which different students engage with that formal curriculum are dramatically different. A child in a government primary school in a remote char community who attends a double-shift school with inadequate infrastructure and underqualified teachers is not receiving the same education as a child in an elite private school in Dhaka with highly qualified teachers, excellent facilities, and comprehensive support systems, even if they are nominally studying the same curriculum.

Closing this gap requires targeted investment in the most disadvantaged parts of the educational system: in the government primary schools of the most remote and underserved geographical areas, in the secondary schools serving the most economically marginal communities, in the non-formal educational programs for those who have been excluded from or have dropped out of the formal system, and in the early childhood education programs that research consistently shows to have the highest returns in terms of long-term educational and life outcomes for disadvantaged children.

10.3 The Vision of the Educated Bangladeshi

What does an educated Bangladeshi look like? What capacities, what sensibilities, what knowledge, what values does a genuinely educating system aim to develop in its students? This is the philosophical question at the heart of educational reform, and answering it well is the prerequisite for answering all the institutional, pedagogical, and administrative questions that follow.

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Drawing on the philosophical traditions examined throughout this commentary, and rooting the vision in the specific cultural, historical, and social context of Bangladesh, this section attempts a sketch of what the genuinely educated Bangladeshi might look like.

The educated Bangladeshi is literate in the fullest sense: not merely able to decode written symbols but able to engage with complex texts, to follow an argument, to distinguish evidence from assertion, to identify the assumptions embedded in a claim, and to construct and communicate her own reasoned positions on matters of importance. She reads Bengali with pleasure and with critical understanding. She reads English with sufficient fluency to access the global knowledge ecosystem that English increasingly mediates. And she has some engagement with at least one other language, whether Arabic, because it is the language of the Quran and of a rich intellectual tradition, or another language that opens a window onto a different cultural world.

The educated Bangladeshi is numerate in the fullest sense: not merely able to perform arithmetic operations but able to use quantitative reasoning to understand and analyze the world, to interpret data critically, to understand the mathematics that underlies modern technology, and to make informed decisions in a world increasingly shaped by quantitative information. She can understand a news report about economic statistics and assess the claims being made. She can understand the mathematics behind climate projections and evaluate the seriousness of the climate challenge facing Bangladesh. And she can apply quantitative reasoning to the everyday decisions of her own economic and social life.

The educated Bangladeshi has a genuine historical consciousness: an understanding of the long arc of the history of the region she inhabits, from its ancient civilizations through the successive waves of cultural, religious, and political change that have made the complex society it is. She knows the story of the Language Movement and the Liberation War, not as a catechism of officially approved facts but as a living history of human courage and sacrifice that has direct relevance to the political questions of her own time. She knows the history of Islamic civilization and its contributions to human knowledge. She knows the history of colonialism and its lasting effects on the society she lives in. And she has some understanding of the history of the wider world and of Bangladesh's place within it.

The educated Bangladeshi has a developed moral sensibility: a capacity to reason carefully about ethical questions, to recognize the competing interests and values at stake in moral dilemmas, to act from principle rather than merely from interest or convention, and to engage respectfully and honestly with people whose moral views differ from her own. She has been shaped by the ethical traditions of her own religious and cultural heritage, whether Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, or one of the indigenous traditions of Bangladesh's diverse communities, and she is able to engage critically and constructively with those traditions rather than merely accepting their authority without reflection.

The educated Bangladeshi is a capable and confident communicator, in speech and in writing, in her mother tongue and in at least one other language. She can express her ideas clearly and persuasively, can listen carefully and with genuine attention to the ideas of others, can participate effectively in discussions and deliberations, and can write accurately, coherently, and with

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something of her own distinctive voice. She is not afraid to speak in public, to disagree respectfully, to ask questions to which she does not know the answer, or to change her mind in the light of new evidence or better argument.

The educated Bangladeshi is a capable citizen: one who understands how the political institutions of her society work, who knows her rights and her responsibilities as a citizen, who is capable of participating meaningfully in democratic processes at the local and national level, who can hold the institutions of government to account through the legitimate channels that democratic society provides, and who is committed to the norms of democratic culture: to truth-telling, to the peaceful resolution of disagreement, to the equal dignity of all citizens, and to the rule of law.

And finally, the educated Bangladeshi is a capable learner: one who has developed the metacognitive awareness to understand how she learns, the intellectual humility to recognize the limits of what she currently knows, the curiosity to want to know more, and the self-directedness to pursue her own learning beyond the boundaries of what a formal educational system has explicitly taught her. In a world that is changing as rapidly as the one in which today's Bangladeshi students will live, the capacity to keep learning throughout life is as important as any specific body of knowledge or skill that a formal education can provide.

10.4 Ten Priorities for Educational Renewal

Drawing together the threads of this entire commentary, this section identifies ten priorities for educational renewal in Bangladesh that are both philosophically grounded and practically achievable, in the sense that the knowledge of what needs to be done exists, the resources to make a meaningful start are available, and the political conditions in the post-2024 Bangladesh context create at least the possibility of genuine reform momentum.

The first priority is foundational learning. Every child in Bangladesh should leave primary school with genuine functional literacy and numeracy. This is not happening now, and it is the single most important failure of the educational system because everything else in a child's educational and economic life depends on this foundation. Achieving universal foundational learning requires focused attention to the early grades, the use of evidence-based instructional approaches including structured pedagogy and targeted teaching at the right level, and sustained investment in teaching quality in the primary school system.

The second priority is teacher quality transformation. The sustained improvement of teacher quality, through more selective recruitment, more rigorous and practically oriented pre-service education, and more systematic and effectively designed in-service professional development, is the most important long-term investment in educational quality. No curriculum reform will succeed if it is implemented by teachers who have not been adequately supported to teach it. No assessment reform will improve learning if teachers do not understand what genuine understanding looks like and how to develop it.

The third priority is curriculum stability and coherence. The constant revision of curriculum with every change of government is enormously damaging to the coherence and the effectiveness of

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the educational system. Bangladesh needs a curriculum that is developed through a genuinely professional and publicly deliberative process, that is stable enough to be effectively implemented, and that is revised on the basis of evidence about its effectiveness rather than on the basis of partisan political calculation. Achieving this requires the creation of an independent curriculum authority with genuine insulation from political direction.

The fourth priority is examination reform. The current examination system, with its domination of the educational culture, its orientation toward rote memorization, and its susceptibility to corruption and fraud, needs fundamental reform. Reforming the examination system requires a shift in assessment philosophy, from testing what students have memorized to assessing what they can actually do with knowledge, as well as reforms to the administration and integrity of the examination process. This is politically difficult because of the examination industrial complex identified earlier, but it is educationally essential.

The fifth priority is equity-focused investment. The distribution of educational investment in Bangladesh must be fundamentally reoriented toward the students and communities that are currently most disadvantaged. This means targeted investment in the most remote and under-resourced government schools, in early childhood education for the poorest families, in secondary education completion for girls, in educational provision for linguistic and religious minorities, and in non-formal education for those who have been excluded from the formal system.

The sixth priority is higher education governance reform. The depoliticization of university governance, through the institutional redesign of appointment processes, the strengthening of academic freedom protections, and the development of a genuinely independent accreditation system, is essential for the recovery of higher education quality. This requires political will to accept the loss of patronage instruments that have been enormously valuable to successive governing parties, and creating that will requires sustained pressure from civil society, the media, the academic community, and the international partners who engage with Bangladesh's higher education system.

The seventh priority is research investment. Bangladesh's extraordinarily low investment in research and development, including in universities, is a fundamental constraint on the country's capacity for knowledge creation and innovation. The establishment of a genuinely independent, peer-reviewed research funding mechanism, modeled on successful national research councils in comparable middle-income countries, is a prerequisite for the development of a research culture in Bangladesh's universities.

The eighth priority is language equity. The deep inequalities associated with Bangladesh's educational language hierarchy need to be addressed through a combination of improved English-language teaching in the government school system, which would reduce the premium on expensive English-medium education, and sustained investment in the quality and the cultural richness of Bengali-medium education, which would reduce the social stigma associated with it.

The ninth priority is madrasa integration. The millions of students in Bangladesh's Madrasa system deserve an education that prepares them fully for participation in the economic and civic

life of contemporary Bangladesh while respecting their religious identity and the community values that have led their families to choose religious education. Achieving this requires a sustained and respectful dialogue between the state and the Madrasa sector, the development of curriculum frameworks that genuinely integrate religious and general education rather than simply adding secular subjects to a religious curriculum, and the creation of genuine pathways between Madrasa education and higher education and professional qualification.

The tenth priority is the formation of an education reform commission of genuine quality and genuine independence, with the mandate, the resources, the time, and the political backing to develop a comprehensive vision for Bangladesh's educational development that can command broad societal support and provide the strategic framework for a sustained multi-decade reform effort. Such a commission cannot solve Bangladesh's educational problems by itself. But it can provide the intellectual leadership, the public deliberation, and the policy roadmap that sustained reform requires.

10.5 The Long Arc

Educational reform is not a project with a completion date. It is a continuous commitment: a commitment to the endless and infinitely demanding work of creating better conditions for the education of the next generation than existed for the generation that preceded it. The most successful educational systems in the world, in Finland, in Singapore, in South Korea, in Japan, did not achieve their quality through single transformative reforms. They achieved it through sustained, consistent, evidence-based investment in the quality of teaching and learning, over periods of decades, maintained across changes of government and shifts in political fashion by a broad social consensus that education was genuinely a national priority and that its quality was a matter of genuine civic concern.

Creating that social consensus in Bangladesh is itself an educational challenge. A society in which most citizens experience education primarily as a mechanism of examination-based credential production, in which the quality of schools is accepted as determined by the class position of the family that attends them rather than as a collective responsibility of the community and the state, and in which the political capture of educational institutions is tolerated as a normal feature of political life, is a society that has not yet fully understood what it is losing by the inadequacy of its educational system.

What Bangladesh is losing is, quite simply, its children. Every year in which a Bangladeshi child attends a school that fails to teach her to read properly, in which a secondary student is prepared for an examination rather than educated for a life, in which a university student receives a degree that does not represent genuine knowledge or skill, is a year of irreversible waste of the most precious resource a nation possesses: the potential of a human being. Multiplied across forty million students and across the decades since independence, this waste is of staggering dimensions, and its consequences, in terms of the human potential not realized, the creative work not done, the knowledge not generated, the democratic citizenship not practiced, are incalculable.

But the waste is not inevitable. The children of Bangladesh are not less intelligent, less curious, less capable of genuine learning than children anywhere else in the world. They have

demonstrated, in the literature and the music and the art and the political activism and the entrepreneurship and the intellectual achievement of the best of their number, that the cultural soil is fertile. What they need is an educational system that takes them seriously, that respects their intelligence and their potential, that provides them with genuine learning rather than the simulacrum of credentials, and that creates the conditions in which the full range of their capacities can develop and flourish.

This is what educational reform in Bangladesh ultimately means. Not a new curriculum framework. Not a new examination format. Not a new governance structure, important as all of these things are. Educational reform means deciding, as a society, that every Bangladeshi child deserves to be genuinely educated, and then doing the hard, sustained, and unglamorous work of creating the conditions in which that education can happen.

Conclusion to Part Ten and the Commentary: The Education Bangladesh Deserves

This commentary began with a paradox: Bangladesh is a country that has achieved remarkable development gains while maintaining an educational system that is, in critical respects, profoundly failing its children and its democratic aspirations. It ends with an argument: that this paradox is not the inevitable condition of a developing country with limited resources and complex challenges, but a political and moral choice, made repeatedly and reproduced institutionally by a political economy that has consistently prioritized the partisan uses of educational institutions over their educational purposes.

The commentary has examined this choice from every relevant angle: philosophical, historical, psychological, pedagogical, legal, political, economic, and comparative. It has traced the roots of the current system in the colonial educational intervention of the nineteenth century and in the political upheavals that have shaped Bangladesh since independence. It has analyzed the philosophical traditions that animate different parts of the system and the tensions between them. It has examined the legal framework and found it inadequate to the challenges of educational justice and institutional autonomy. It has compared Bangladesh's educational experience with that of other nations and identified both sobering cautionary examples and genuinely encouraging models of what is possible. And it has attempted, in this concluding part, to synthesize these threads into a coherent account of what genuine educational reform in Bangladesh requires.

The account is not pessimistic. Bangladesh has genuine assets: a young and large population with demonstrated intellectual vitality, a civil society with considerable analytical capacity and civic commitment, a political culture in which education has always been a significant public concern, and a growing economic base that, if properly managed, can provide more resources for educational investment. The student uprising of 2024 demonstrated that the desire for a different kind of institution, more honest, more just, more genuinely committed to its stated purpose, is alive and powerful in Bangladesh's young generation. And the commitments of the BNP government to increased educational investment and to institutional reform, whatever the

concerns about their implementation, represent at least a formal acknowledgment of the reform agenda that the evidence demands.

But the account is honest about the difficulty. Educational reform in Bangladesh faces structural barriers, embedded in the political economy of the system and in the deep patterns of institutional behavior that successive governments have reinforced, that are very difficult to overcome. Overcoming them will require sustained political will that goes beyond electoral cycles, institutional redesign that constrains political capture rather than depending on political virtue, sustained financial investment that prioritizes the most disadvantaged rather than the most politically connected, and a cultural shift in how education is understood, from the acquisition of credentials to the development of human beings, that is the work not of a single government or a single reform but of a generation.

The children of Bangladesh deserve this work. They deserve an educational system that takes seriously the equal dignity of every human being and the equal potential of every child. They deserve schools that are genuine places of learning rather than mere certification factories. They deserve universities that are genuine homes of free inquiry rather than arenas of partisan political competition. And they deserve a society that understands that the quality of the education it provides to its most vulnerable children is the truest measure of its commitment to its own stated values of justice, equality, and human dignity.

Bangladesh has made this commitment in its constitution, in its policy documents, in its international obligations, and in the stated aspirations of every government since independence. The time has come to make it real.

Supplementary Commentary: The Intersection of Climate Change and Education in Bangladesh

The physical geography of Bangladesh places its educational system in a unique and increasingly urgent relationship with one of the defining challenges of the twenty-first century. Bangladesh is one of the countries most severely threatened by climate change: its low-lying delta geography makes it extraordinarily vulnerable to sea-level rise, cyclonic intensification, riverine flooding, and the salinization of agricultural land and freshwater supplies. The World Bank and other international organizations have projected that Bangladesh could lose a significant portion of its habitable land to sea-level rise and flooding by the end of the century, displacing tens of millions of people and creating an unprecedented internal migration crisis. And the effects of climate change are already being felt, in the intensification of cyclones, in the unpredictability of monsoon rainfall, in the intrusion of saltwater into coastal agricultural land, and in the increased frequency and severity of flooding in areas that were previously only occasionally inundated.

The educational dimensions of this climate crisis are multiple and severe. At the most immediate level, climate-related disasters regularly disrupt educational provision: floods damage school buildings, force school closures, and displace students and teachers. The frequent school closures caused by flooding, heat waves, and cyclones have been a significant source of learning loss in

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Bangladesh, contributing to the gaps in educational attainment that the annual school statistics document. The COVID-19 pandemic's school closures added to this accumulated loss in a particularly severe way, but climate-related school disruption has been a persistent background feature of the Bangladeshi educational landscape long before the pandemic.

At a deeper level, the climate crisis creates educational challenges related to the curriculum content and the values that education transmits. Climate education, including understanding of the physical science of climate change, its projected impacts on Bangladesh specifically, the range of adaptation and mitigation responses available, and the governance challenges of coordinating collective action on a global public goods problem of this complexity, is a genuine and important domain of knowledge that Bangladesh's educational system needs to take much more seriously than it currently does. The integration of climate education into the national curriculum is not merely a matter of adding a new topic to an already overloaded school day. It requires a rethinking of how science, geography, social studies, and civics are taught, in ways that make the climate crisis real, comprehensible, and motivating for students who will be the citizens and the decision-makers of the climate-challenged future.

At the deepest level, the climate crisis raises questions about the values and the worldview that education should cultivate: questions about humanity's relationship to the natural world, about the ethics of intergenerational responsibility, about the kinds of citizenship and the kinds of political action that the climate emergency requires. An educational system that teaches students to be consumers of natural resources without responsibility for their consequences, or that teaches them to accept the authority of powerful interests over the evidence of science, is an educational system that is preparing them very badly for the world they will inhabit. An educational system that cultivates the scientific literacy, the ethical commitment, and the civic agency needed to understand and respond to the climate challenge is an educational system that is taking its responsibilities to the future seriously.

Supplementary Commentary: The Rohingya Crisis and Its Educational Dimensions

The presence in Bangladesh of approximately one million Rohingya refugees, the vast majority of whom have been living in and around the Cox's Bazar camps since the mass displacement of 2017, is one of the largest and most complex humanitarian challenges in the world, and it has significant and underexamined educational dimensions.

The educational situation of Rohingya children in the camps is, by any measure, a crisis of profound severity. The Global Partnership for Education has noted that in Cox's Bazar, close to fifty percent of secondary school age youth do not attend school, a figure that reflects both the inadequacy of educational provision in the camps and the barriers that Rohingya children face in accessing the formal Bangladeshi educational system. Within the camps, educational provision has been provided primarily by NGOs and international organizations through a Learning Facility system that provides basic literacy and numeracy instruction in a linguistically appropriate form, but that is widely acknowledged to be inadequate in quality, coverage, and progression to secondary and post-secondary levels.

The educational challenge for Rohingya children in Bangladesh is complicated by several political and legal dimensions. The Bangladesh government has maintained a policy of not integrating Rohingya children into the formal Bangladeshi education system, reflecting concerns about the normalization of long-term settlement and about the resource demands of serving a very large refugee population in a relatively poor country. The Rohingya community's own educational aspirations are shaped by a complex mixture of the desire for education that will be useful if and when they return to Myanmar, the need for educational provision that preserves their language, culture, and identity, and the recognition that children who have spent their formative years in the camps need educational pathways that open toward some kind of economic and social future.

The educational dimensions of the Rohingya crisis are therefore an international as well as a national challenge. Bangladesh cannot be expected to provide, from its own resources, comprehensive quality education for one million refugees, and the international community's financial support for Rohingya education, while substantial in absolute terms, has not been commensurate with the scale of the need. But the educational rights of Rohingya children, like those of all children, are not contingent on the political resolution of their refugee status, and the international legal obligation to provide them with an education that enables them to develop their capacities and maintain their human dignity applies whether or not a durable political solution to their situation is in sight.

Final Word: An Education That Believes in Children

The children of Bangladesh do not need to be told that education matters. They know it, viscerally and with the kind of certainty that comes from watching older siblings and parents navigate the brutal economics of an economy in which educational credentials are the primary passport to any kind of economic security. They queue for seats in coaching centers. They stay up past midnight with textbooks. They take examinations that determine the trajectory of their lives with a stoic endurance that is both admirable and heartbreaking. They believe in education with a faith that the educational system, in its current form, does not deserve.

The educational system of Bangladesh needs to become worthy of that faith. It needs to become an institution that believes in children as much as children believe in it: that takes seriously the extraordinary range and depth of potential in every child who walks through a school gate, that creates the conditions in which that potential can develop into genuine capability, and that treats the education of every child not as a bureaucratic function to be performed with minimum expenditure but as a profound moral and civic responsibility to be discharged with all the commitment, creativity, and care that it demands.

This is not a utopian vision. It is a demand, grounded in the deepest commitments of every philosophical and religious tradition that has shaped human civilization, and backed by the best evidence of educational science, for an educational system that does what it says it does: that educates, in the full and rich sense of that word, the generation that will inherit and build the Bangladesh of the future.

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The commentary concludes where it began: with the conviction that the study of education in Bangladesh is not merely an academic exercise. It is an encounter with the most fundamental questions that any society can ask of itself, questions about what human beings are for, about what we owe each other across the generations, and about what kind of civilization we are trying to build. These questions have no final answers. But the commitment to keep asking them, honestly, rigorously, and with a genuine concern for the dignity and the potential of every child, is the philosophical foundation of every educational system that deserves the name.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

This commentary has drawn on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including: the Constitution of Bangladesh (1972 and subsequent amendments); the Primary Education (Compulsory) Act 1990; the Right to Education Act 2010; the National Education Policy 2010; the National Curriculum Framework 2021; the Bangladesh Education Statistics published annually by BANBEIS; the Annual Primary School Census; the Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh 2018-2030; UGC Annual Reports; PISA, TIMSS, and ASER assessment databases; publications of the Global Partnership for Education, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO on Bangladesh; the published works of Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Rabindranath Tagore, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and the comparative education scholars cited throughout; and a substantial body of recent scholarship from the journals Educational Philosophy and Theory, Comparative Education Review, and the International Journal of Educational Development, among others. The most recent developments in Bangladesh's educational policy, including the BNP government's twelve-point education reform agenda and the FY 2025-26 budget allocations, have been drawn from primary government documents and from reporting in The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, The Business Standard, and other leading Bangladeshi media outlets.

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This comprehensive ten-part commentary provides a critical, multi-disciplinary analysis of Bangladesh's education system, examining its philosophical foundations, historical development, structural architecture, and persistent crises.

The author argues that the system is deeply marked by its colonial inheritance, political patronage, chronic underfunding, and a fragmented three-stream structure (Bengali-medium general, English-medium elite, and Madrasa religious education).

Key problems examined include:

- a severe learning crisis where most students fail to achieve basic literacy and numeracy;
- a high-stakes examination culture that drives rote memorization, grade inflation, and widespread cheating;
- a politically captured university governance system that undermines academic freedom and quality;
- deep inequities in language policy (Bengali vs. English) that reproduce class hierarchies;
- the marginalization of indigenous linguistic minorities;
- and the failure of teacher education and professional development.

The commentary also engages with major reform efforts, including the 2023 competency-based curriculum (largely reversed after the 2024 political upheaval), the student-led July 2024 uprising and its educational implications, and the reform agenda of the post-2024 interim and BNP governments. Drawing on philosophy (Dewey, Freire, Tagore, Al-Ghazali), political economy. comparative education, and legal analysis, the book concludes with a vision for educational renewal centered on justice, **foundational learning**, **teacher transformation**, examination

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